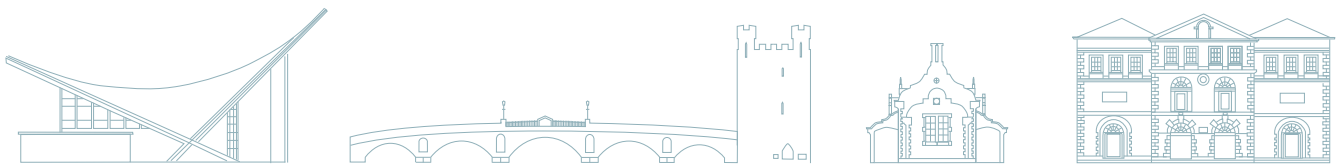




Athy Urban Regeneration Framework
Appendix 1 of the
Athy Local Area Plan 2021-2027

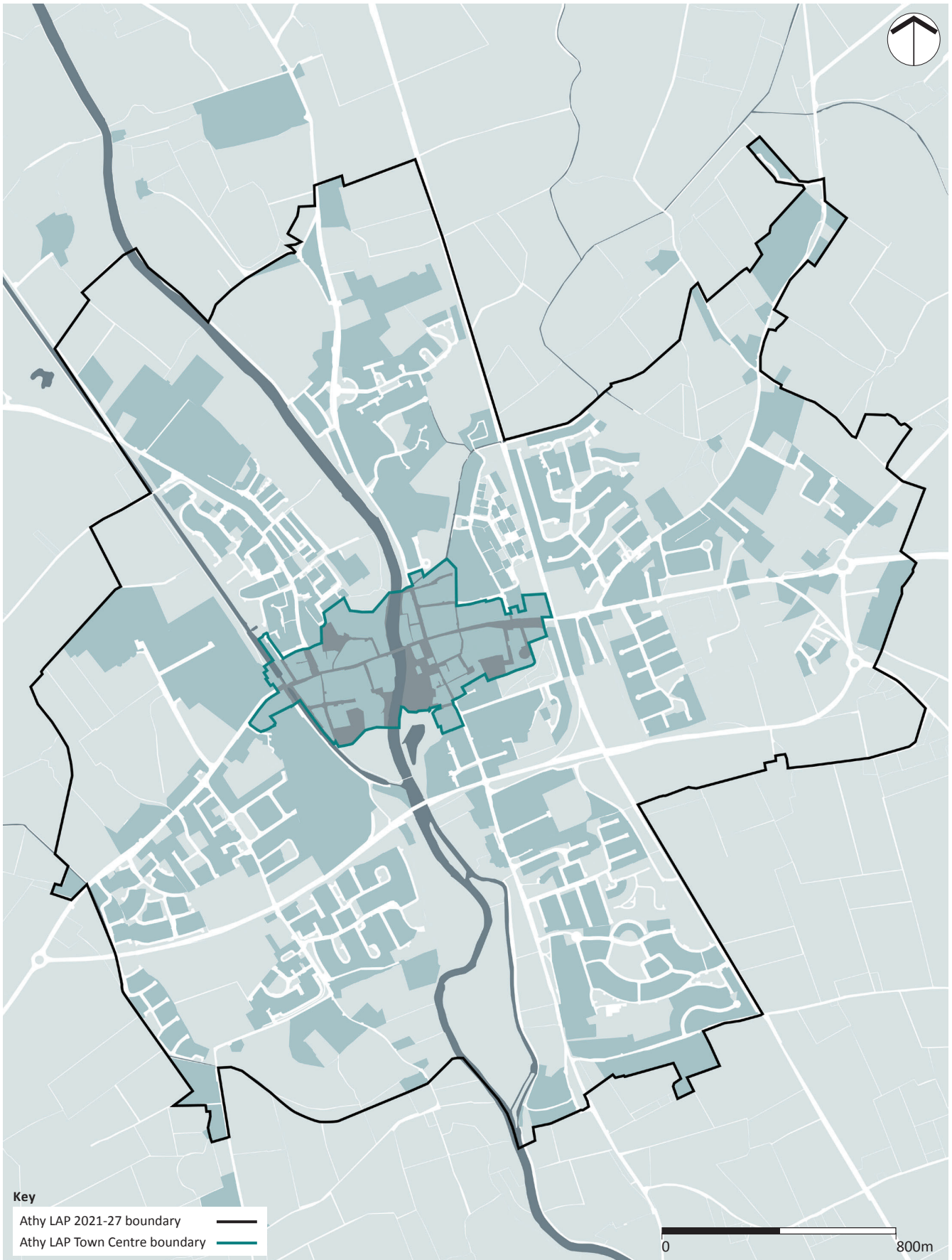


Athy Urban Regeneration Framework

Appendix 1 of the Athy Local Area Plan 2021-2027

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1. Introduction and Context

1.1 Introduction

The Urban Regeneration Framework for Athy sets out a strategy to guide and co-ordinate various projects which will help to rejuvenate the town whilst also providing a platform for its future sustainable development. While applying to Athy as a whole, the framework primarily focuses on the regeneration of the historic and commercial core by identifying and presenting opportunities to improve the retail and commercial attractiveness of the town centre; creating revitalised streets and public spaces; facilitating and providing for the development and improvement of appropriate town centre activities including retail, residential, cultural, tourist and amenity uses. The framework also seeks to promote sustainable mobility within Athy by increasing connectivity and prioritising sustainable movement routes to key destinations within the town.

1.2 Purpose and Structure

The purpose of the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework is to assist in the realisation of a number of important provisions set out in the Athy Local Area Plan 2021-2027. Accordingly, this document can be considered to be a first but necessary step towards the implementation of the vision for the town as outlined in Section 2.3 of the Local Area Plan.

Designed to act as a holistic response to the weaknesses identified in the town, the Framework adopts a tailored approach in seeking to overcome the current developmental challenges affecting Athy, whilst also aiming to maximise the potential of its unique built and natural assets in order to instigate transformative place-based change in the town. In this regard, the Framework has a long term focus that extends beyond the life of the Plan, where its role is also to assist and contribute to a model of low carbon development and the creation of a climate resilient, healthy and more inclusive settlement.

The Framework has been constructed so that it can be presented as a comprehensive supporting document alongside any future application for funding for urban regeneration and development projects within the town, as identified in the document.

The Athy Urban Regeneration Framework has been structured as follows:

- Part 1:** *Introduction and Context* – Setting out the Framework’s over-arching policy context, this section will also outline its central role and purpose and detail how it incorporates elements of previous plans and strategies undertaken in the town.
- Part 2:** *Urban Quality Analysis* – This section investigates the current urban environment in Athy, highlighting its weaknesses and identifying the town’s inherent strengths to be built-on and used as a basis for rejuvenation and self-sustaining growth.
- Part 3:** *Areas of Opportunity* – Identified character areas will be the focus of examination of potential transformative place-based change with the aim of improving the liveability of Athy for its residents whilst also enhancing the overall visitor experience. On a larger scale, linkages and accessibility within the town will also be examined. The Framework will conclude with a series of identified priority projects selected on the basis of their ability to kick-start regeneration within the town.

Figure 1.1: (opposite page) Athy and its hinterland

1.3 Aligning with National and Regional Planning Policy

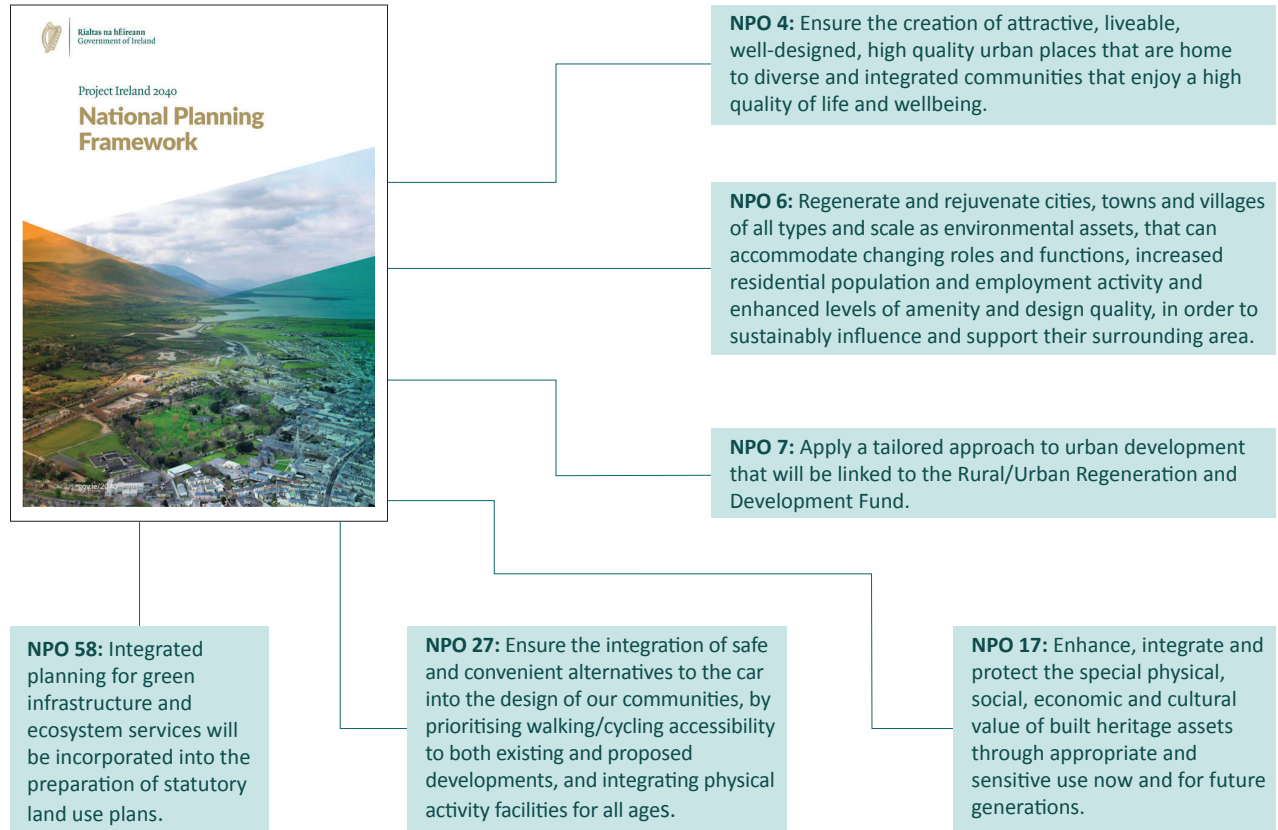


Figure 1.2: National Policy Objectives relevant to the Framework

Athy Urban Regeneration Framework consciously aligns with both national and regional planning policy objectives. This is to both acknowledge the overall hierarchy of planning policy, whilst also taking into consideration its provisions and desired outcomes regarding the regeneration and place-based development of our urban settlements.

The National Planning Framework (NPF) places particular emphasis on towns as environmental assets that can “accommodate changing roles and function, increased residential population and employment activity and enhanced levels of amenity and design quality in order to sustainably influence and support their surrounding area” (National Strategic Objective 6). This objective is central to the overall Urban Regeneration Framework for Athy. Consequently, the Plan and the Framework both acknowledge that in order for such rejuvenation and re-purposing to be successful, there will be a requirement for the urban core to increase its residential population and levels of employment activity, whilst also providing enhanced levels of amenity and design quality. It is noted that the NPF is supported by a €3 billion Rural and Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (National Planning Objective 7) covering the period to 2027¹. Accordingly, the Athy Urban Regeneration Framework is designed to act as a ‘business plan’ to attract the funds needed to realise the vision of a rejuvenated and vibrant urban core.

Certain critical aspects of the Framework resonate strongly with the key principles set out in the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (2019-2031), which focuses on improving the long term quality of life of the population by promoting healthy placemaking, low carbon development and creating the right conditions for employment growth and economic opportunity.

¹ Presently, in seeking funding for regeneration projects in Athy, Kildare County Council applies to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF). However, the next Census (scheduled for 2022) will likely record Athy’s population to exceed 10,000 persons. On foot of this, all applications for the town will need to be submitted to the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF).

1.4 Relationship with the Athy Local Area Plan 2021 - 2027

The Athy Urban Regeneration Framework shares the same research background as the Local Area Plan and was prepared in tandem with the Plan. Consequently, it can be considered to both inform and be informed by the Plan. The Framework therefore seeks to translate and ground the ideas and concepts set out in the Vision Statement of the Plan along with the Eight Strategic Development Principles (see Fig. 1.3) into clearly identifiable projects and actions. Such a focused approach requires the Framework to carefully analyse the reasons behind the many issues and challenges affecting the performance of the town, particularly its retail core. Having considered its weaknesses, the Framework will then seek to build on the strengths of the town centre by developing a responsive and co-ordinated urban design-based approach where the principles of healthy placemaking and sustainability are placed to the front and centre of the document.

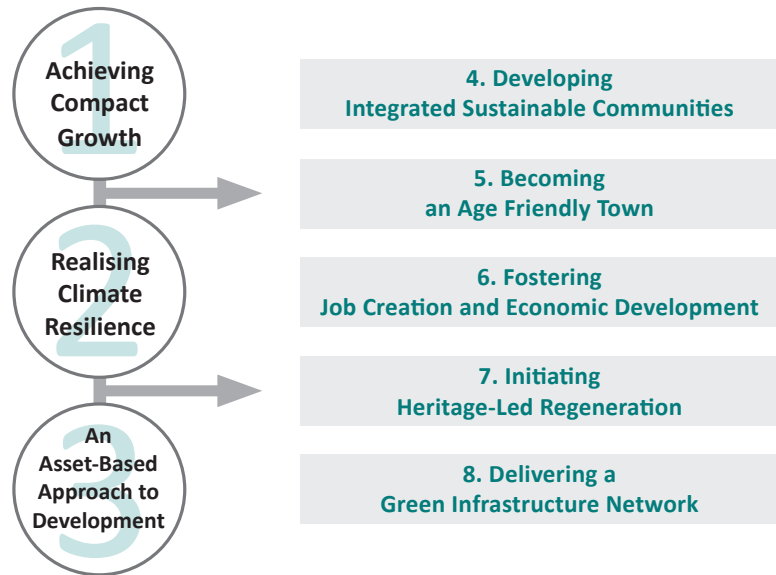


Figure 1.3: The Athy Local Area Plan’s Eight Strategic Development Principles

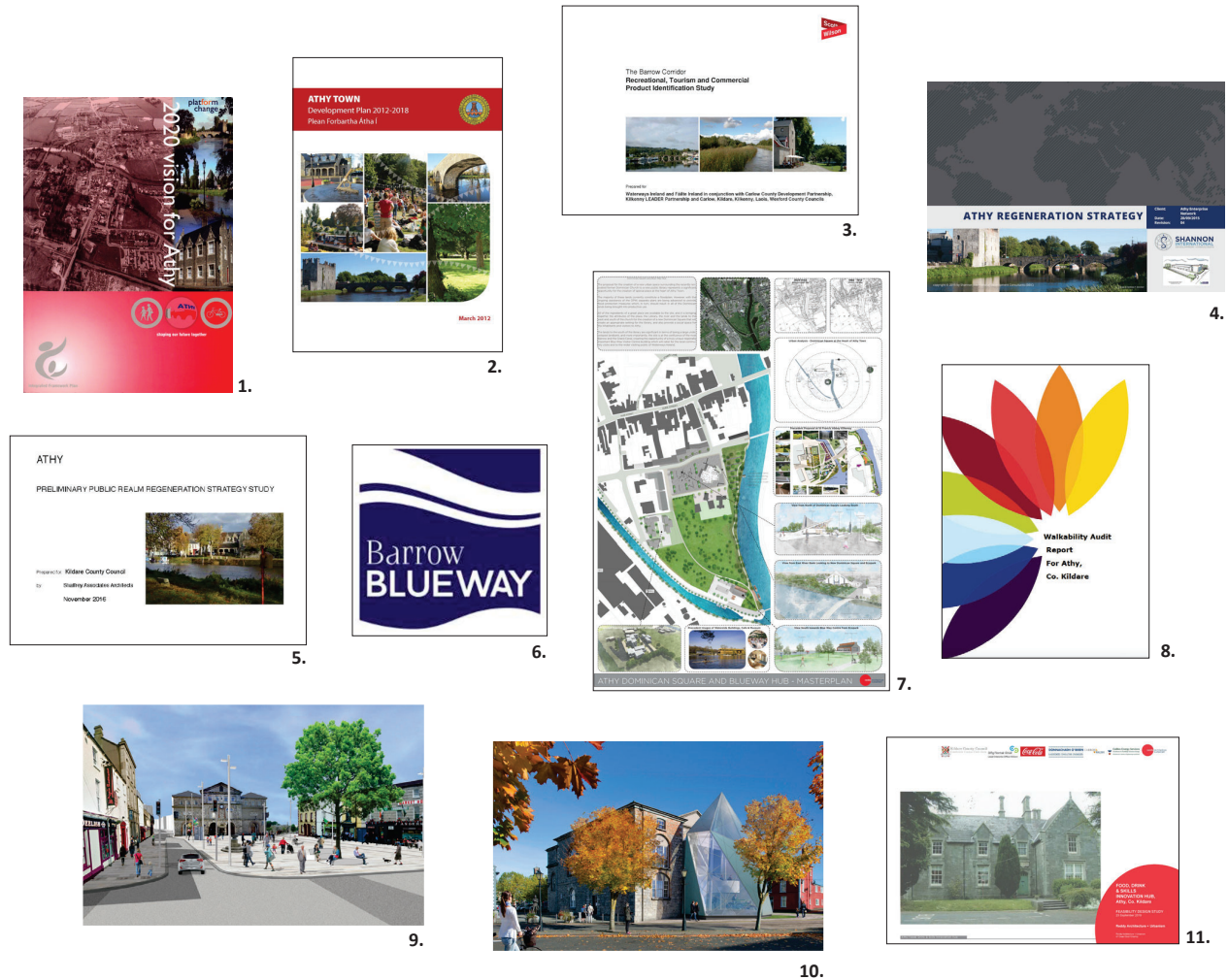
In seeking to achieve a sustainable model of development for the town, the focus will be centred on maximising the potential of Athy’s built and natural heritage by using these existing assets to enhance its role as a visitor destination and create new local employment opportunities. It is envisaged that a targeted and co-ordinated investment strategy, concentrated for the most part within the town centre, will lead to the creation of local synergies (the development of tourism-based enterprises, for example) which will in turn initiate a broader economic regeneration of the town over the life of the plan and beyond. The Athy Urban Regeneration Framework is underpinned by policies and objectives threaded throughout the Athy Local Area Plan 2021-2027.



Figure 1.4: Athy Heritage Centre - Shackleton Museum on Emily Square (credit: Athy Photography)

1.5 Previous Plans and Current Proposals

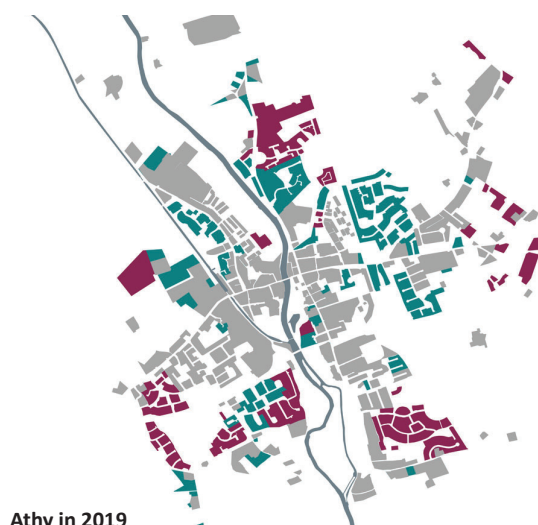
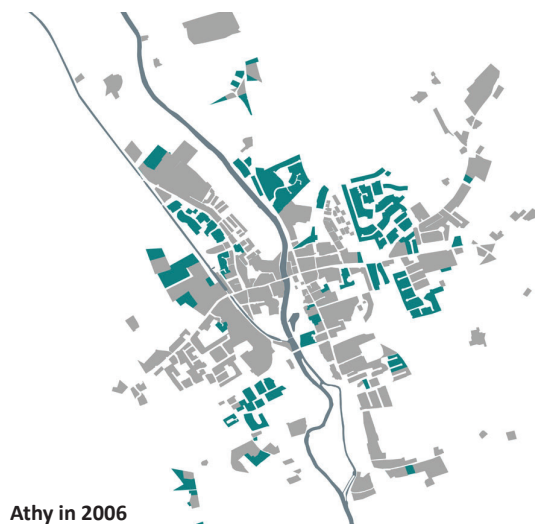
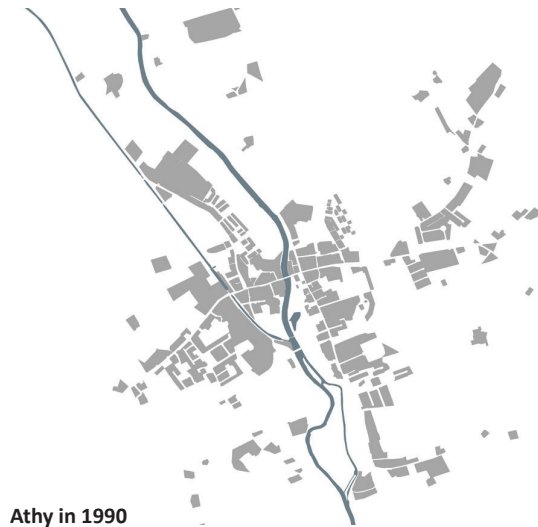
This Framework acknowledges the existing extensive number of strategies and plans prepared for Athy over the past number of years, the purpose of which was to develop the town and increase its attractiveness as a place to live, visit and do business in. The Framework draws on this body of work and incorporates many previously outlined ideas and proposals which are considered to best align with the Plan’s strategic development principles. In doing so, the Framework seeks to not only co-ordinate and further progress the work already carried out to date but also prioritise the projects that are considered to have the most potential in achieving the desired transformative place-based change within the town.



1. **2020 Vision for Athy: Integrated Framework Plan (2004)** - Non-statutory long term strategy for land use and transportation
2. **Athy Town Development Plan 2012-2018** - Statutory land use plan
3. **The Barrow Corridor Recreation, Tourism, Commercial and Product Strategy Study (2012)** - Developing the Barrow Valley as a key visitor destination within the region.
4. **Athy Regeneration Strategy, Athy Enterprise Network (2015)** - Economic development and branding strategy
5. **Athy Preliminary Public Realm Strategy Study (2016)** - Sets out a provisional framework for improvements within the town centre.
6. **Barrow Blueway (2018)** - A multi-use shared leisure route along the existing Barrow Line Canal and Barrow Navigation towpath.
7. **Dominican Square and Blueway Hub Masterplan proposal** - Initial design iteration for the Dominican Lands.
8. **Walkability Audit Report for Athy (2020)** - Kildare County Council document focusing on creating an age friendly town centre.
9. **Emily Square Environmental Improvement Scheme (2018)** - Approved Kildare County Council (Part 8) proposal.
10. **Athy Heritage Centre - Shackleton Museum Refurbishment and Extension** - Approved Kildare County Council Part 8 proposal.
11. **Athy Food, Drink and Innovation Hub Feasibility Study (2020)** - Proposal to repurpose the former Model School was awarded funding for further design and planning work from the Regional Enterprise Development Fund.

2. Urban Quality Analysis

2.1 Historic Growth and Recent Development Trends



From its medieval origins Athy developed into a small but locally important market town serving a large rural hinterland. Its strategic location on a river crossing along with incremental developments in its infrastructure, such as the development of the canal system in the late 18th Century, and the railway in the mid 19th Century helped to sustain its role as a hub for business and services in the south of the county. However, limited growth resulted in the extent of the town being confined, for the most part, to the present day town centre area until the mid 20th century.

Over the past number of decades the town began to experience rapid growth in both its population and urban footprint. This development occurred in a diffused pattern characterised by low-density, car-orientated residential housing estates being accessed off the main arterial routes into the town. Such growth peaked during the 2001-2010 period where 1,467 homes were constructed, representing approximately 40% of all residential units in the town in 2016 (CSO 2016 and AIRO). This boom in residential development was accompanied by an unprecedented growth in population which increased by 58.4% between 2002 and 2011 (Census 2002 and 2011).

Whilst residential construction has virtually halted in recent years, with only 34 units being constructed between 2011 and 2016 (Census 2016), other development trends have arisen in the town over the past decade. These include elevated levels of residential and commercial vacancy within the town centre and the relocation of educational and health facilities to less accessible areas around the periphery of Athy. Such development patterns represent key long term challenges to the overall sustainability of Athy, rendering the town a more car-oriented and increasingly dispersed settlement which is becoming more dependent on other towns for retail services.

Figure 2.1: (top left) Athy's urban footprint in 1990,
Figure 2.2: (centre left) Athy's urban footprint in 2006,
Figure 2.3: (bottom left) Athy's urban footprint in 2019

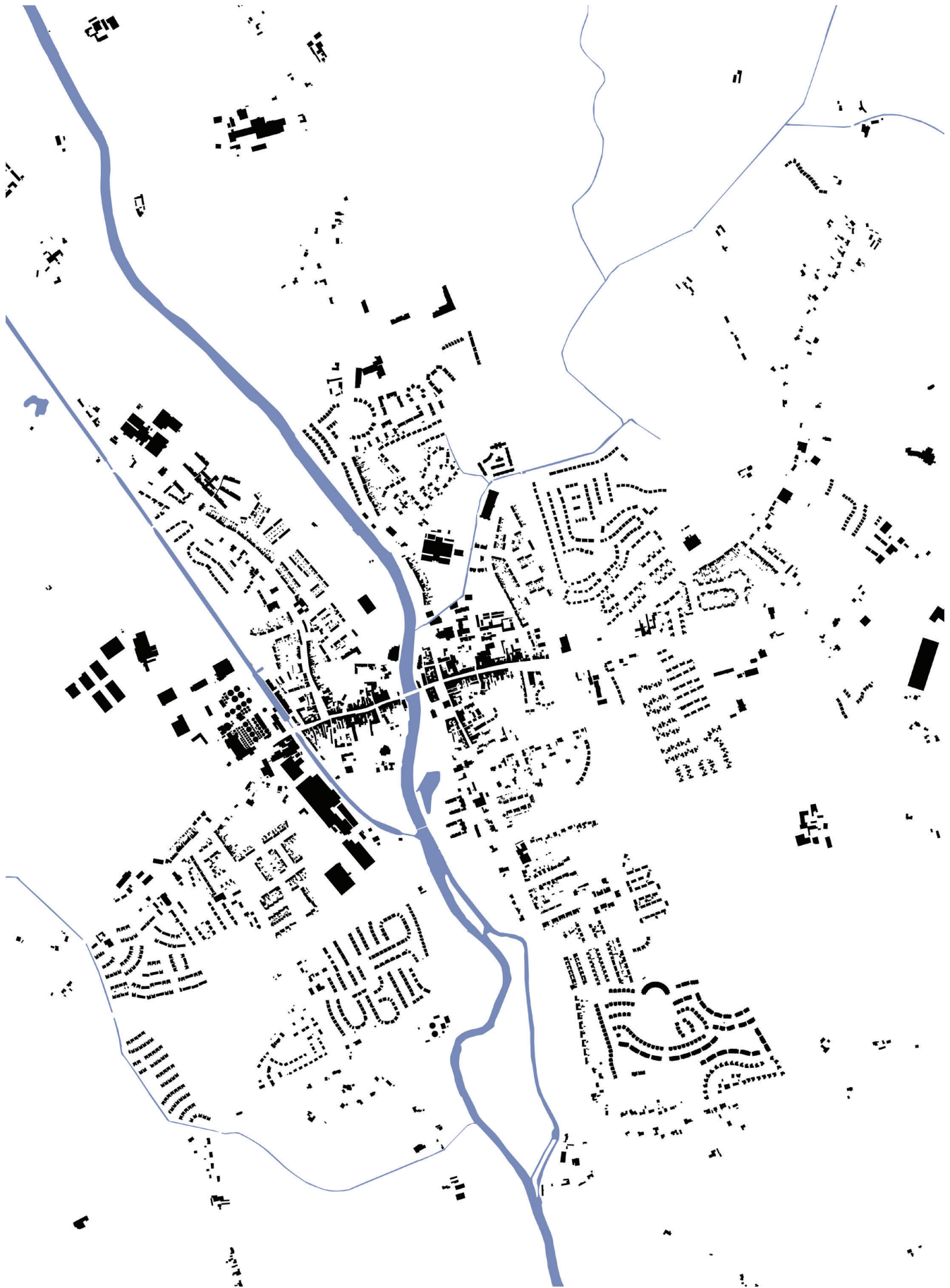


Figure 2.4: Athy figure ground and water map

2.2 Urban Structure of Athy: An Overview

The figure ground map of Athy (Figure 2.5) shows the built-up area of the town and its immediate hinterland and illustrates a number of defining characteristics, the most notable of which consists of the central unbuilt void which separates the town into east and west. However, the reason for this becomes clear when presented with the figure ground and water map (see Figure 2.4) which shows the enduring effect that waterways, particularly the River Barrow, has had on the development of the town. Figure 2.4 also shows the intensity of development within the relatively confined area of the historic core. The density of development highlights the street pattern within the town centre, where the east-west Duke Street / Leinster Street / William Street axis is clearly visible, along with its intersection with the north-south Stanhope Street / Offaly Street axis at Emily Square to the east of the river crossing (see Figure 2.19 for a more detailed map of Athy Town centre).

The inverted figure ground map (see Figure 2.6) illustrates the large floor plates of the established industrial lands immediately to the west of the town centre. This map also clearly indicates the dispersed nature of the town's development of recent years where low-density detached and semi-detached housing developments predominate. Ribbon development consisting of one-off houses along arterial routes is the most defining feature of the town's rural hinterland.

An interesting aspect of Athy's urban structure can be observed when green open spaces are also illustrated (see Figure 2.7). These show that substantial green spaces surround residential developments and thread their way through the heart of the town centre. In this regard, the potential of this space to be incorporated into a future integrated green infrastructure network, which would also include high-quality pedestrian and cycle routes, offers an interesting opportunity to develop sustainable mobility and recreational routes within the town.

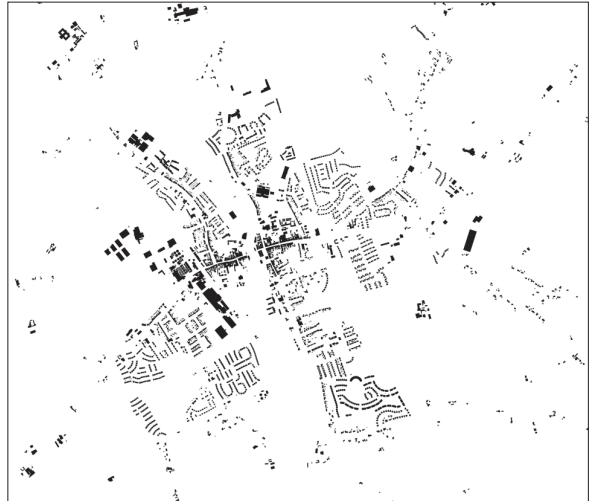


Figure 2.5: Athy figure ground map

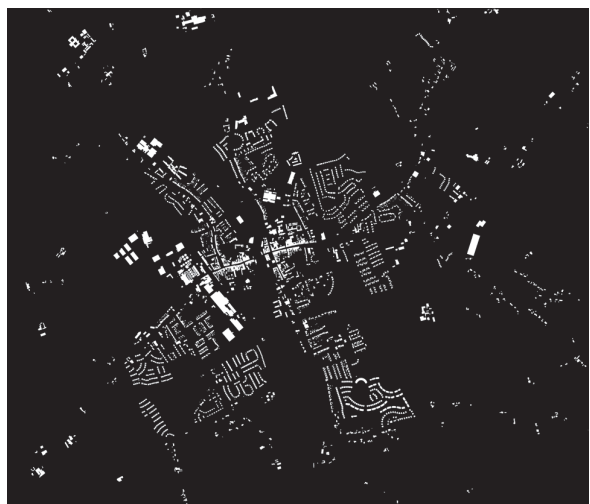


Figure 2.6: Athy inverted figure ground map



Figure 2.7: Athy green open space map

2.3 Permeability and Walkability

How the urban structure has developed in a settlement has huge impacts on permeability and consequently the walkability of a town. The more permeable and connected a town’s network of streets and paths are the easier it is to move around a settlement and the more likely that this movement will be made by sustainable means (i.e. on foot or bicycle). Figure 2.8 shows the street and urban block layout of Athy. The size of the urban blocks within the town can be compared to the 120 metre x 120 metre urban block illustrated in the legend (see Figure 2.8, below). According to the Government’s Design Manual for Urban Streets and Roads (p.44, DMURS, updated 2019), these dimensions are the maximum size which should not be exceeded in order to enable a reasonable level of permeability and encourage pedestrian movement. In contrasting this urban block with the street and block map of Athy it is clear that the vast majority of urban blocks, as defined by the street and road network in the town, exceed these dimensions. Whilst it may not be possible to provide such a level of permeability within certain land uses such as enterprise and employment, where large floor plates are required to provide for the efficient functioning of business, such a desired pattern of development should always be met when planning for new residential areas.



Figure 2.8: Athy street and block map

2.3.1 Permeability Within the Town Centre

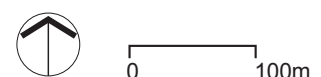
The level of permeability in a town centre provides a good indication as to the level of activities and uses in the commercial core. Figure 2.9 illustrates a street and block map of a portion of Athy Town Centre comprising of the main commercial core along the east-west Leinster St. / Duke St. axis. In common with most traditional Irish towns there is a reasonably high level of permeability. It is seen that an opening in the urban block at both Emily Square and Edmund Rice Square has allowed for active uses to spill out from the main commercial artery into these spaces. This is also the case with Woodstock Street further to the west.

Contrasting the level of permeability of Athy Town Centre with that of other town centres in the county provides an interesting and useful comparison. Figure 2.10 shows the town centre of Naas. Unusually for a historic Irish town centre, the urban structure of Naas is relatively impermeable. This provides a major reason as to why the commercial core of Naas, for the most part, is limited to one space; its Main Street. In contrast, the highly permeable layout of Newbridge Town Centre (Figure 2.11), particularly to the northwest of Main Street and Edward Street has resulted in a greater number of streets being very active and hosting a diverse range of commercial and retail uses.



Note: All maps above have the same scale

Figure 2.9: (top) Street and block map of Athy town centre,
Figure 2.10: (bottom left) Street and block map of Naas Town Centre,
Figure 2.11: (bottom right) Street and block map of Newbridge Town Centre



2.3.2 Through Routes Versus Cul-de-sacs

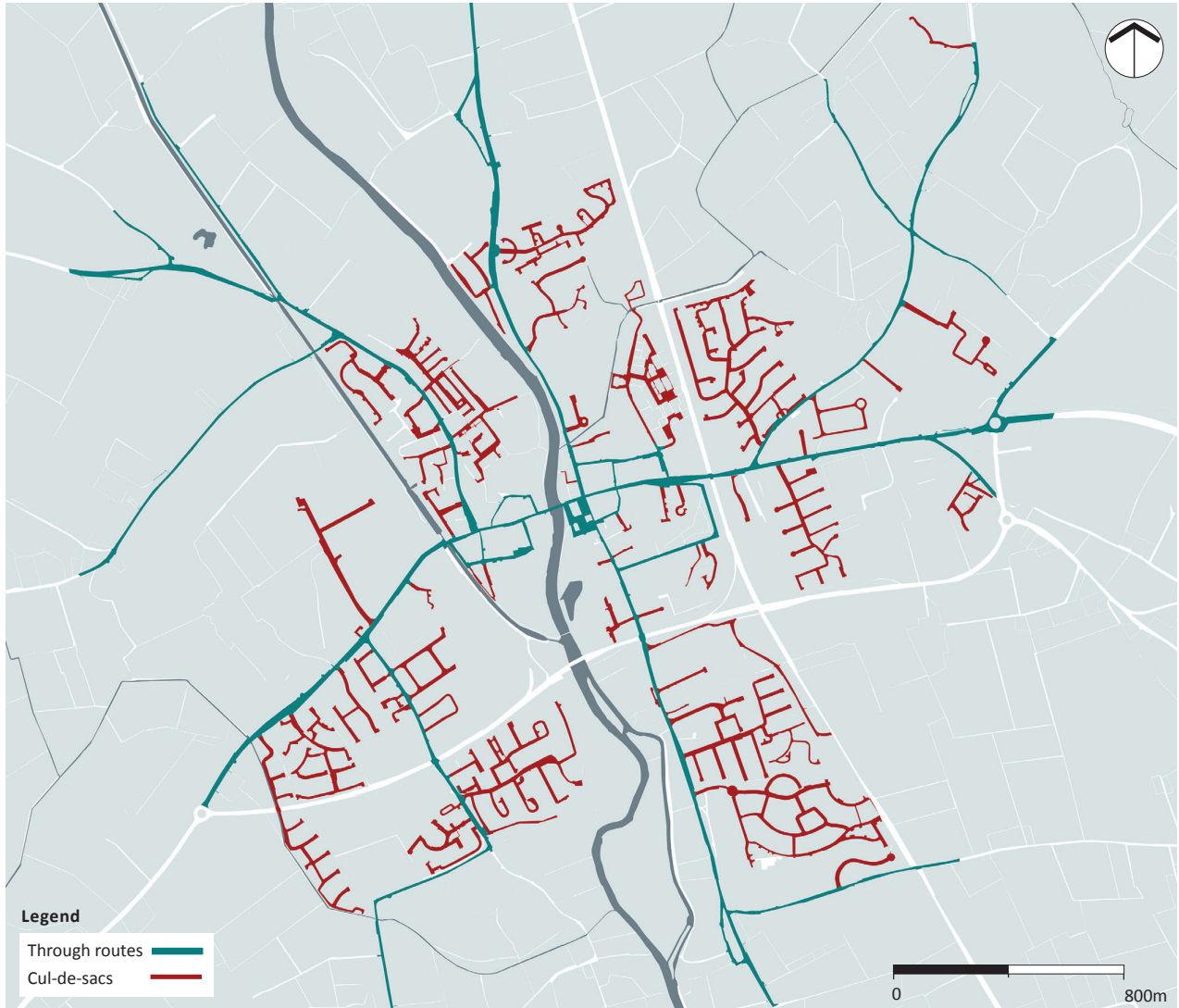


Figure 2.12: Through routes and cul-de-sacs in Athy



Figure 2.13: Corrán Árd Estate



Figure 2.14: Dún Brínn Estate

The street and block maps on the previous pages do not tell the full story about permeability in Athy. Figure 2.12 provides a more revealing picture as to how the town has grown, illustrating a specific development feature which has been allowed to become predominant. This is the cul-de-sac. Aside from the key arterial routes and the historic streets within the Athy Town Centre the majority of the urban structure of the town is composed of cul-de-sacs which for the most part, serve residential estates. The examples in Figures 2.13 and 2.14 show developments where residents in some cases would have to walk for over 800 metres (10 minutes) just to reach the entrance of their estate.

2.3.3 Town Centre Versus Periphery

This section seeks to investigate and highlight the consequences that such a proliferation of cul-de-sacs has in terms of its effects on accessibility to key services by the residential population of the town. It is an accepted principle of planning that a 5-minute walk (400 metres) to a local shop or a 10-minute walk (800 metres) to a key public amenity (i.e. a public transport hub or town centre) are the maximum distances that the majority of people will make a decision to walk to rather than drive². Usually, a notional 800 metre circle radiating from a town centre or railway station is used to denote the 10-minute walking distance on plans. However, this is often misleading as it does not take into account the permeability of the street and block network. Figures 2.15 - 2.18 illustrate the notional 800 metre distance along with the true extent of the accessible area that lies within 800 metres of four identified key destinations within the town, as follows:

1. Athy Town Centre (Emily Square)
2. Athy Train Station
3. Athy Schools Campus (Monasterevin Road)
4. Athy Primary Care Centre (Dublin Road)



Figure 2.15: True extent of area (shaded in dark green) accessible by foot within 800 metres of the town centre

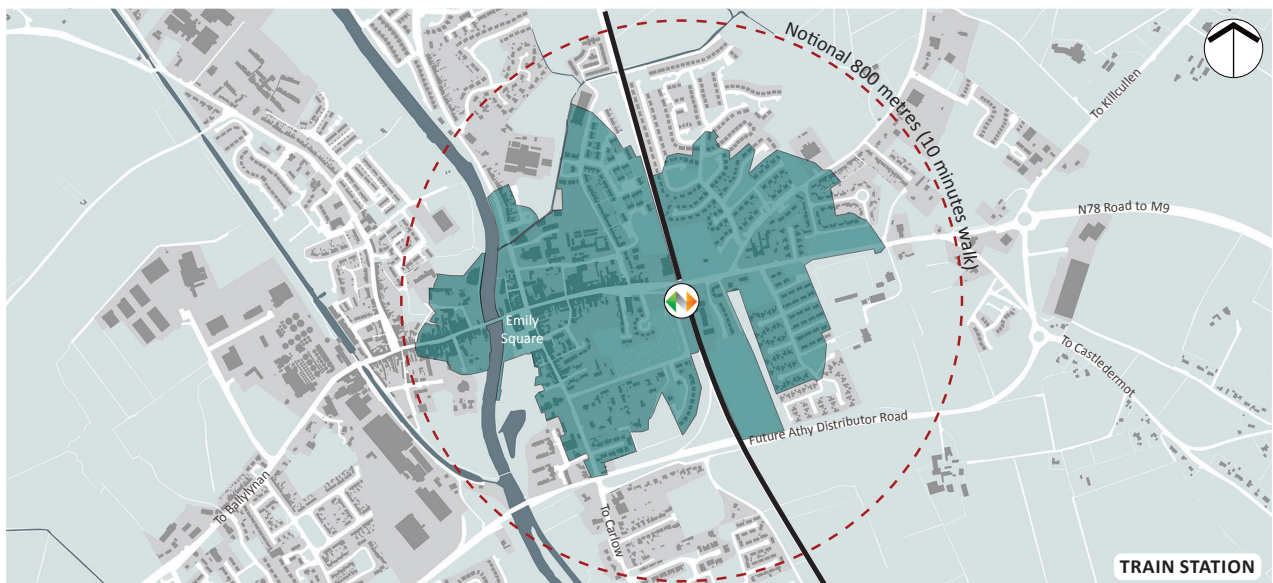


Figure 2.16: True extent of area (shaded in dark green) accessible by foot within 800 metres of Athy Train Station

² Sources: Urban Design Compendium (2000) and Am Azmi et al. (2012)

Figure 2.15 and Figure 2.16 (see previous page) show that while the real area of accessibility for a 10-minute walk from Emily Square and Athy Train Station respectively is a lot more restricted than the notional 800 metres radius, the connected nature of the street network in the area has enabled a relatively sizeable portion of the town to be reached. An even greater area will be within a 10-minute walk with the opening of the Athy Distributor Road (scheduled for completion in late 2023) which will incorporate enhanced pedestrian/cycling provision along with new high-quality connections, particularly to the train station. Conversely, the area within reach of the schools campus on the Monasterevin Road and Athy Primary Care Centre is extremely limited. This is due to the peripheral location of both sites in relation to the rest of the built-up area of the town.

The location of key services in peripheral areas in conjunction with the proliferation of cul-de-sacs in the town, leaves the population of Athy particularly dependent on private vehicular use, thus increasing the likelihood of even short trips to these key destinations being made by car. This has long term consequences for the overall health of the resident population, their ability to access key services, and levels of isolation and loneliness experienced by people in what is an aging town (see Section 4.5 of the Local Area Plan).



Figure 2.17: True extent of area (shaded in dark green) accessible by foot within 800 metres of the schools campus



Figure 2.18: True extent of area (shaded in dark green) accessible by foot within 800 metres of the Primary Care Centre

2.4 Athy Town Centre

The centre of the town is focused around the Leinster Street / Duke Street axis and is, in comparison to the overall footprint of Athy, confined to a limited area, comprising the most historic part of the town³. This area also forms the commercial core of Athy and performs a vital retail, services and employment centre for the residents in the town and its rural hinterland. However, as noted in the Plan (see Chapter 5), the town has struggled in recent years to maintain its retail offer. This can be explained in part to external factors, such as the overall economic situation along with retail developments in larger neighbouring settlements which have increased their attractiveness vis-à-vis Athy's retail offer.

The following sections seek to examine the internal dynamics of the town centre, specifically investigating its land use patterns and public realm quality in order to provide a baseline review of the overall urban quality within the commercial core. The aim of this analysis is to address the local reasons that are playing a role in the decline of the town centre, while providing an evidence-based context to enable the identification of regeneration and development opportunities which will be expanded upon in Part 3 of this document, along with supporting policies, objectives and actions outlined within the Local Area Plan.

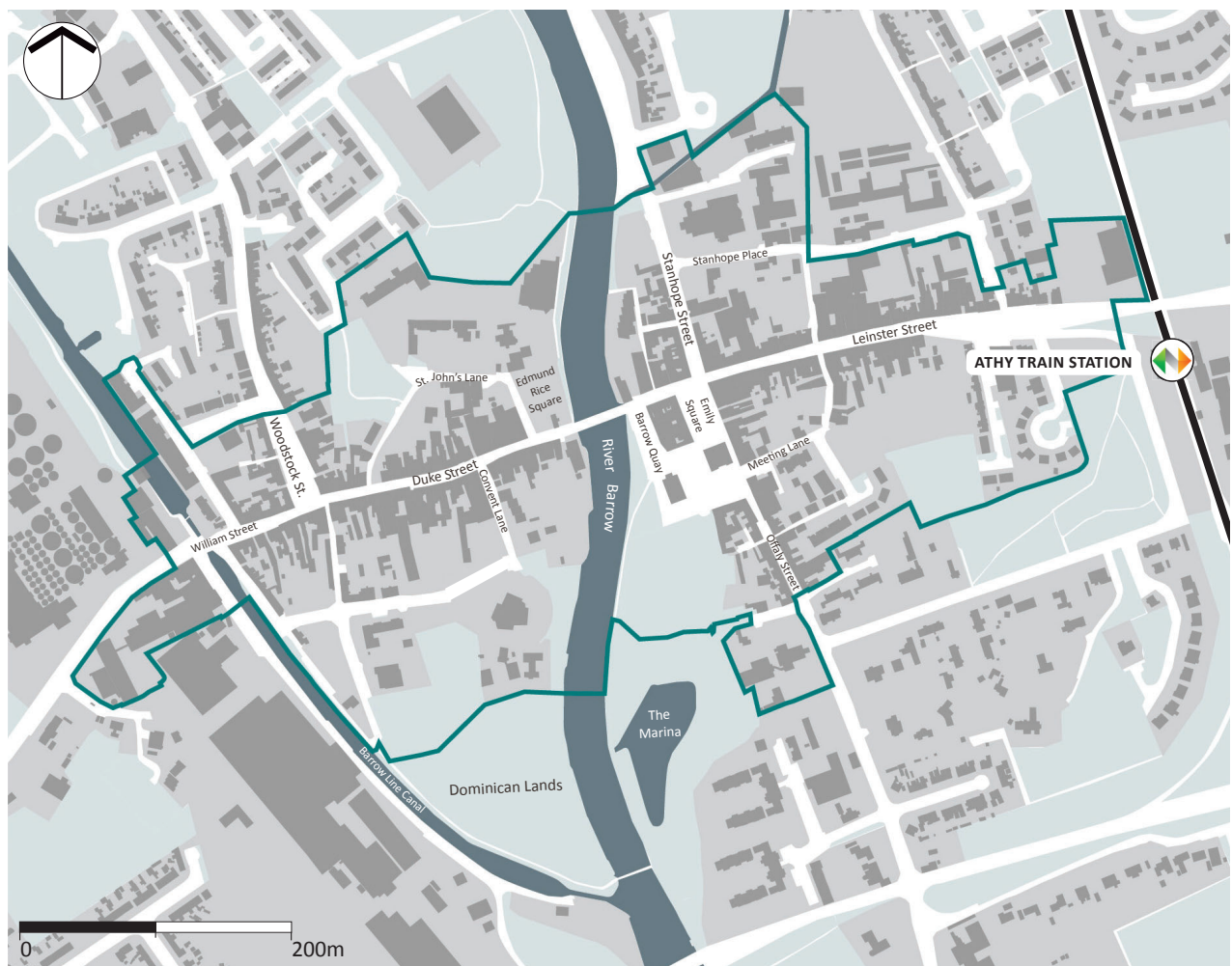


Figure 2.19: Athy Town Centre lands outlined in dark green (Athy Local Area 2021-2027)


















³ For further information on Athy's historical development and the evolution of its architectural character refer to the Athy Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) Statement of Character which has been published alongside the Plan.

2.5 Land Uses in the Town Centre

The land use survey⁴ highlights that Athy town centre is seriously affected by elevated levels of vacancy. For example, the retail vacancy rate is calculated to be 24.1%⁵, which is considered to be extremely high⁶. The effect on the vitality of the town is amplified by the fact that such vacancies are concentrated within quite a confined area. The survey investigated ground floor uses only, however it was also observed that the upper floors within the majority of units (aside from residential uses) appeared to be either disused or allocated for storage/back office uses.

Whilst it is noted that this survey was conducted in late July 2020, in the period after the first Covid-19 national lockdown of Spring/early Summer 2020, the results are consistent with those of a previous survey undertaken in summer 2018. Figure 2.20 (see opposite page) illustrates that elevated levels of vacancy are prevalent throughout the town centre, even within its core retail area (Leinster Street / Duke Street axis). However, there are a number of vacancy ‘black spots’ which are particularly concentrated along William Street and Offaly Street. There are also several units which are in a dilapidated or even derelict state, indicating long term levels of vacancy and highlighting that this has been a chronic and ongoing challenge for the town centre for many years.

Land Use Key

	Convenience		Religious Services
	Comparison		Storage and Warehouses
	Retail Services		Residential
	Other retail services (none of above)		Undetermined/Inaccessible
	Leisure Services		Vacant (with previous use shown behind)
	Finance and Business Services		Vacant (if previous use is undetermined)
	Health and Medical Services		Surface Car Parking
	Public Services		Town Centre Boundary (Athy Local Area Plan 2021-2027)
	Industrial		

Land Use Classifications - Description of Use

- **Convenience:** Supermarkets, Newsagents, Groceries and Frozen Food, Butchers, Markets, Health Foods, Fishmonger, Delicatessen, Bakers and Confectioners, Tobacconists, Vape Shops, Off-Licence, Shoe Repairs etc.
- **Comparison:** Pharmacies, Clothing and Footware, Jewellers, Charity Shops, Opticians, DIY and Hardware, Garden Centre, Booksellers, Electrical Goods, Florists, Furniture shops, Stationers, Office Supplies etc.
- **Retail Services:** Clothing and Fancy Dress Hire, Dry Cleaner and Laundrette, Filling Stations and Garages, Health and Beauty (e.g. beauticians, nail bars), Hairdressers/Barbers, Other Retail Outlets, Photo Processing, Photo Studio, Post Offices, Repair, Alterations and Restoration, Travel Agents, Vehicle Repair and Services
- **Leisure Services:** Bars, Pubs and Wine Bars, Bingo and Amusement, Cafes, Casino and Betting Offices, Cinemas, Clubs, Disco and Nightclubs, Fast Food and Takeaways, Hotels and Guest Houses, Restaurants, Sports and Leisure Facilities, Theatres and Concert Halls
- **Finance and Business Services:** Property Services, Retail Banks, Building Society, Building Supplies and Services, Business Goods and Services, Employment and Careers, Financial Services, Legal Services, Other Business Services, Printing and Copying
- **Health and Medical Services:** Dental Surgery, Doctors surgery, Health Centre, Nursing Home, Osteopath, Other Health and Medical Service, Rest Home, Veterinary Surgeon
- **Public Services:** Advice Centre, Community Centre, Council Offices, Educational Establishment, Emergency Services, Information Centre, Kindergarten, Library, Museum and Art Gallery, Tourist Information
- **Religious Services:** Place of Worship
- **Storage and Warehouses:** Not including retail warehousing outlets

⁴The survey was conducted using the land/building use classifications developed by the Heritage Council in their Collaborative Town Centre Health Check (CTCHC) Programme.

⁵Retail vacancy is calculated on the vacancy rate of comparison, convenient and retail services units in the town centre. The survey found that 28 out of 116 retail units in the town were vacant. It should be noted that this figure is different to the figure for overall commercial unit vacancies.

⁶The Heritage Council’s Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme considers town centre retail vacancy rates in excess of 10% to be ‘problematic’. It is noted that the target town centre retail vacancy rate under normal trading conditions is 5%.

2.5.1 Analysis of Selected Uses

Lower Order Uses

The land use survey enabled specific uses to be identified and mapped. This analysis highlighted that ‘lower order’ uses such as charity shops, betting shops, discount stores (including pound shops) and hairdressers have a strong presence being particularly concentrated within the designated Core Retail Area of Athy, along Leinster Street and Duke Street. For example, there are 18 hair/beauty salons, barbers and tanning shops within the town centre. Whilst such uses are a vital part of every towns’ retail offer, their over concentration at the expense of higher order uses can have a negative effect on the overall retail attractiveness of the town, discouraging inward shopping trips and creating the conditions for excessive retail leakage to neighbouring town centres.



Figure 2.21: Lower order uses within the town centre

Pubs and Vacant Pubs

The land use survey recorded 15 pubs trading within the town centre and 8 vacant pubs. A comparison with the 2018 land use survey indicates that the level of vacancy has not changed. Furthermore, historic images (Google Street View) show that the majority of these vacant pubs were also vacant as far back as 2009. Such long term vacancies indicate that such uses are no longer viable and demonstrate the need for consideration of alternative functions and uses for these units in order to increase the vibrancy and vitality of Athy Town Centre.



Figure 2.22: Distribution of pubs (teal) and vacant pubs (dark red) within the town centre

2.5.2 Vacancies and Dereliction

Figure 2.23 highlights the extent of vacant commercial and vacant residential units within the town. As noted in Section 2.5, they occur throughout the town, creating a deadening effect on the vibrancy of the entire town centre. The type of vacant uses is widespread ranging from retail, to pubs and restaurants, offices, a hotel and industrial activities. It is noted that the level of residential vacancies within the town centre has reduced since 2018 with several previously vacant including some derelict units having been refurbished. An example of this can be seen along Offaly Street (see Figures 2.24 and 2.25). This is perhaps the result of ongoing shortage of housing accommodation in Athy, with the town being designated a Rent Pressure Zone (RPZ) in April 2020.



Figure 2.23: Vacant commercial units (purple) and vacant residential units (yellow) in Athy Town Centre, July 2020



Figure 2.24: Derelict houses on Offaly St. (August 2018)



Figure 2.25: Refurbished houses on Offaly St. (July 2020)



Figure 2.26: Derelict unit on Offaly St. (August 2018)



Figure 2.27: Refurbished unit on Offaly St. (July 2020)

While residential vacancy may be declining within the town centre, the extent of vacancies across all retail services and leisure services is cause for concern. Altogether some 63 commercial units (i.e. non-residential units) were recorded as being vacant in the survey. As noted in Section 2.5.1 there are many instances of long term vacancies, which is evident by their poor condition and long standing 'for sale' and 'to let' signs' (see below). In comparison to the 2018 survey, several commercial units within the town have been refurbished, which has helped improve the overall appearance of the town centre (see Figures 2.26 and 2.27). This is in part, due to the work of the Local Authority who have engaged heavily with property owners in the area. Whilst it is important that the appearance of individual units are maintained, the critical aspect of a building is that it must be kept in use and contribute to the vitality of the town. Accordingly, the outputs of this regeneration framework must continue to place particular emphasis on active land management measures within the town centre.

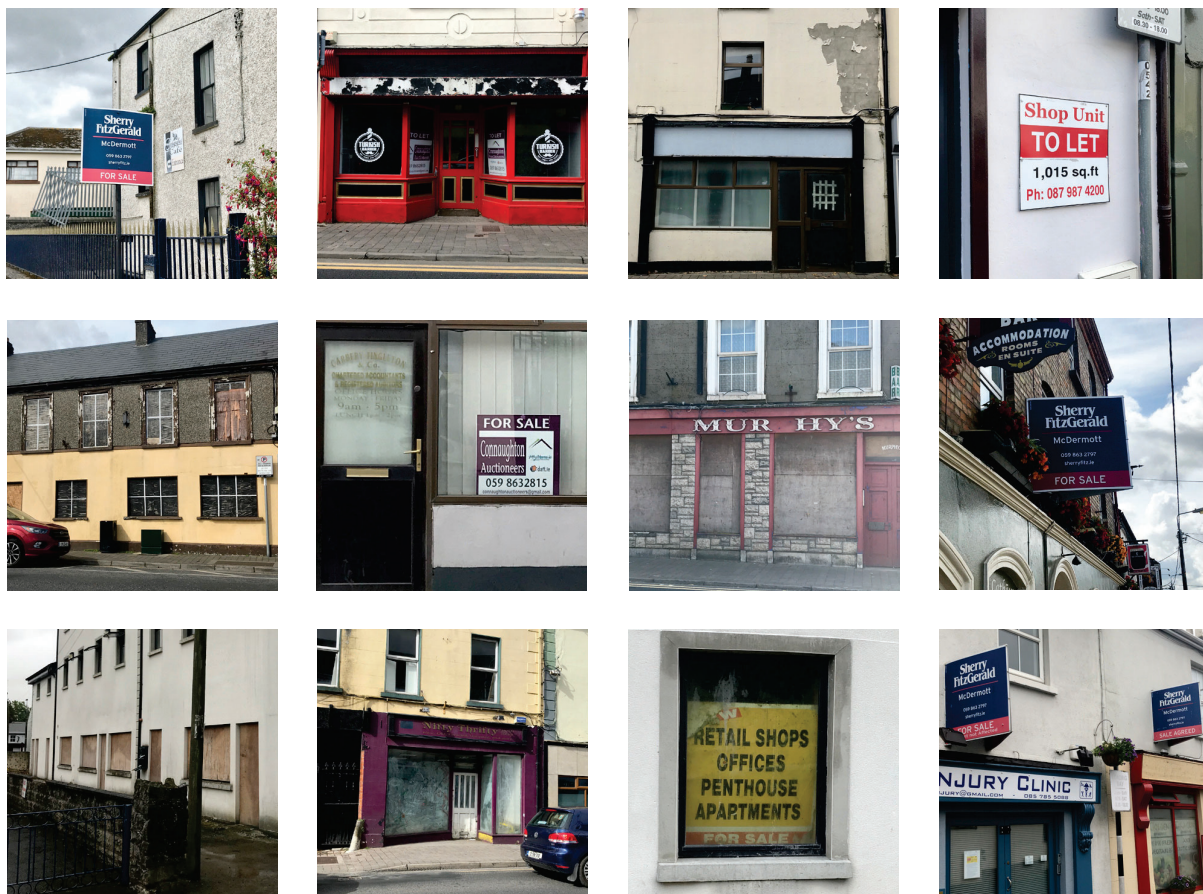


Figure 2.28: A proliferation of vacant and neglected units in Athy Town Centre

2.6 Assessment of Active Frontages

For an area to be a vibrant hub of activity there must not only be a multiplicity of different land uses sited on relatively small plot sizes but crucially, these activities need to be on display and easily identifiable to the person in the street (i.e. an active frontage). An assessment of active frontages is a useful exercise in helping to identify the streets that are likely to have a higher footfall than others, owing to the high degree of active frontages. For the purpose of the study an active frontage can best be described as a commercial frontage in which the activity within is easily identifiable and its design helps to animate the street. For example, an active frontage can take the form of an attractive pub façade, an outdoor seating area or a transparent window frontage displaying merchandise. A well-marked entrance leading to uses on the upper floors of a building can also be defined as active as the more doors opening onto a street the more active it will be. Alternatively, an inactive frontage is one that detracts from the life of the street. This can take the form of a blank façade (i.e. a wall or a fence) or it can be a unit that is vacant and shuttered. Such inactive façades create a deadening effect on a street’s vitality.

The exercise investigated frontages centred around Athy’s designated retail core. In keeping with most traditional market towns there are characteristically high levels of active frontages in Athy along its key streets. It can be seen from the study (see Figure 2.29) that the various concentrations of active and inactive frontages correlate strongly with the level of vibrancy in each street. For example, the presence of active frontages diminishes greatly on side streets (e.g. Meeting Lane and St. John’s Lane), which consequently have a distinctive backland and inactive character. It is noted that the level of active frontages has been markedly reduced by the elevated level of vacancies throughout the commercial core. One positive aspect is that such inactive frontages are temporary in nature and can quickly become active and contribute to the life of the street, through the creation of a new use.

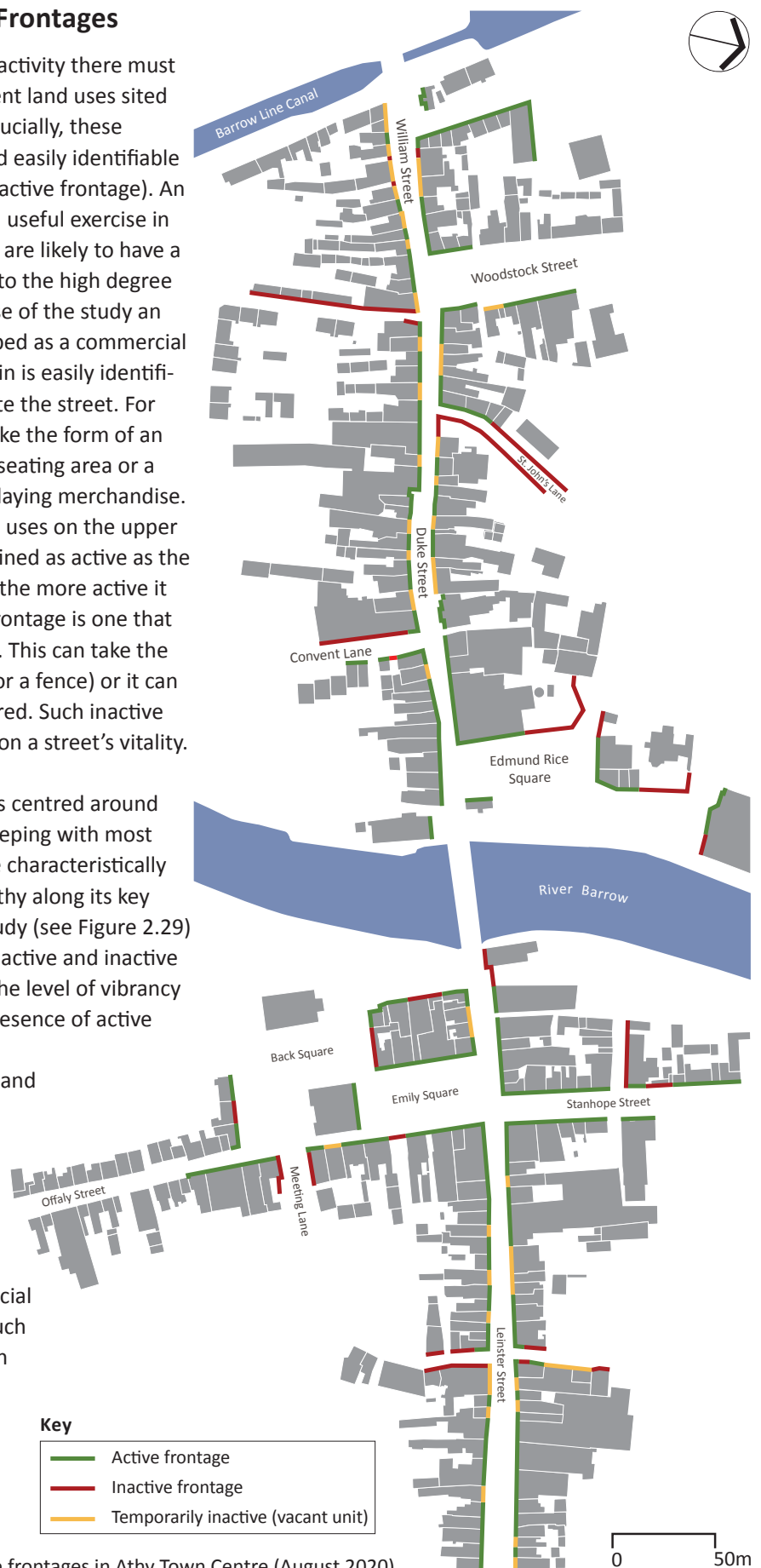


Figure 2.29: (right) Active and inactive frontages in Athy Town Centre (August 2020)

2.7 Public Realm Quality within the Town Centre

The majority of Athy Town Centre has been designated an Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) due to its inherent character and value. The appreciation of such a historic built heritage asset to a great extent depends on the quality of the surrounding public realm i.e. a town's network of streets and public spaces. A high quality public realm allows a visitor (tourist, resident shopper, business investor etc.) to have a positive and memorable experience of the town, increasing their potential to linger, spending more time and contributing to the local economy. Therefore, the public realm has the potential to become an attractor and a destination in its own right, adding vibrancy and creating a more active town centre.

Whilst this section highlights issues relating to the current design, layout and standard of public realm in the town, the analysis below should be viewed in the context of the future potential of its public space and how it could be re-imagined, particularly with the construction of the Athy Distributor Road which will reduce the percentage of through traffic over the long term by over 40%.

2.7.1 Visual Clutter

Visual clutter in the public realm can negatively impact on the visitor experience, detracting from the character of the urban form and impeding peoples' journeys through the urban space. A key feature of visual clutter is street clutter i.e. the over-use and poor siting of street furniture. While there are some instances of street clutter present in Athy, it is limited within the town centre (see Figures 2.30 and 2.31). However, a more prominent issue is overhead wiring and intrusive cables and ducting around shop frontages, which oftentimes is redundant. This issue is particularly noticeable along the Duke Street / Leinster Street axis which lies at the heart of the ACA. Such wiring not only reduces the visual amenities of the area but also has the potential to damage the architectural and historic fabric of the buildings themselves, many of which are protected structures.



Figure 2.30: Non-pedestrian friendly railings at Emily Square



Figure 2.31: Excessive bollards on Offaly Row



Figure 2.32: A proliferation of wiring on Leinster Street



Figure 2.33: Wires affixed to the 15th Century White Castle

2.7.2 Street Furniture

The extent and distribution of street furniture (i.e. bins, seating, signage etc.) is limited in Athy. However it is noted that there is no defined design palette present in the town. For example, there are varying types of bins, street bollards and seating distributed across the town centre. Athy needs a coordinated approach to the design and siting of street furniture, one which is based on a bespoke palette of materials and complements the town’s built character. More seating is also required along both the River and Canal.



Figure 2.34: Variety of bin types

2.7.3 Pavement Quality

The standard of footpaths varies greatly throughout the town centre with a wide variety of materials used ranging from concrete, to brick and pavement slabs. Overall, the footpaths are generally in good condition within the Core Retail Area, however there are pockets of badly maintained pavement on Duke Street and on Woodstock Street. As one moves away from the active streets to the side streets, such as John’s Lane and Meeting Lane, the quality of the footpaths reduces greatly and in some cases there is a complete absence of pavements (Figure 2.36).



Figure 2.35: Good quality pavement on Woodstock Street

The overall width of the pavements within the town is oftentimes too narrow and in some cases dangerously so (Figure 2.38). While it is acknowledged that in many instances footpaths cannot be widened due to the historic and narrow character of the town centre streets, it is noted that where there is space available on streets it is more often than not given over to on-street car parking, despite the presence of several car parks in the area.



Figure 2.36: Lack of footpath on Meeting Lane



Figure 2.37: Varying pavement standards within town centre



Figure 2.38: Substandard footpath on Augustus Bridge

2.7.4 Car Parking within the Town Centre

As noted in the previous section, where public space becomes available within Athy town centre it is generally allocated to on-street parking. In addition to this, there is a huge provision of public car parking spaces comprising of both public car parks operated by the Local Authority and privately owned ones, often sited to the rear of commercial premises. It is noted the 2009 Traffic Management Plan and car parking strategy found that there was 1,010 parking spaces in the town centre comprising of 586 public parking spaces and 424 private spaces. This huge provision has resulted car parking being a dominant feature of the public realm within the historic core and takes up a considerable footprint of the town centre area (Figure 2.39). Indeed, it can be seen that in some prominent public areas, the urban environment becomes a chaotic scene. An example of this can be seen in the Dominican lands car park where Athy Library, a striking piece of modernist architecture is surrounded in a sea of cars (see Figure 2.40).

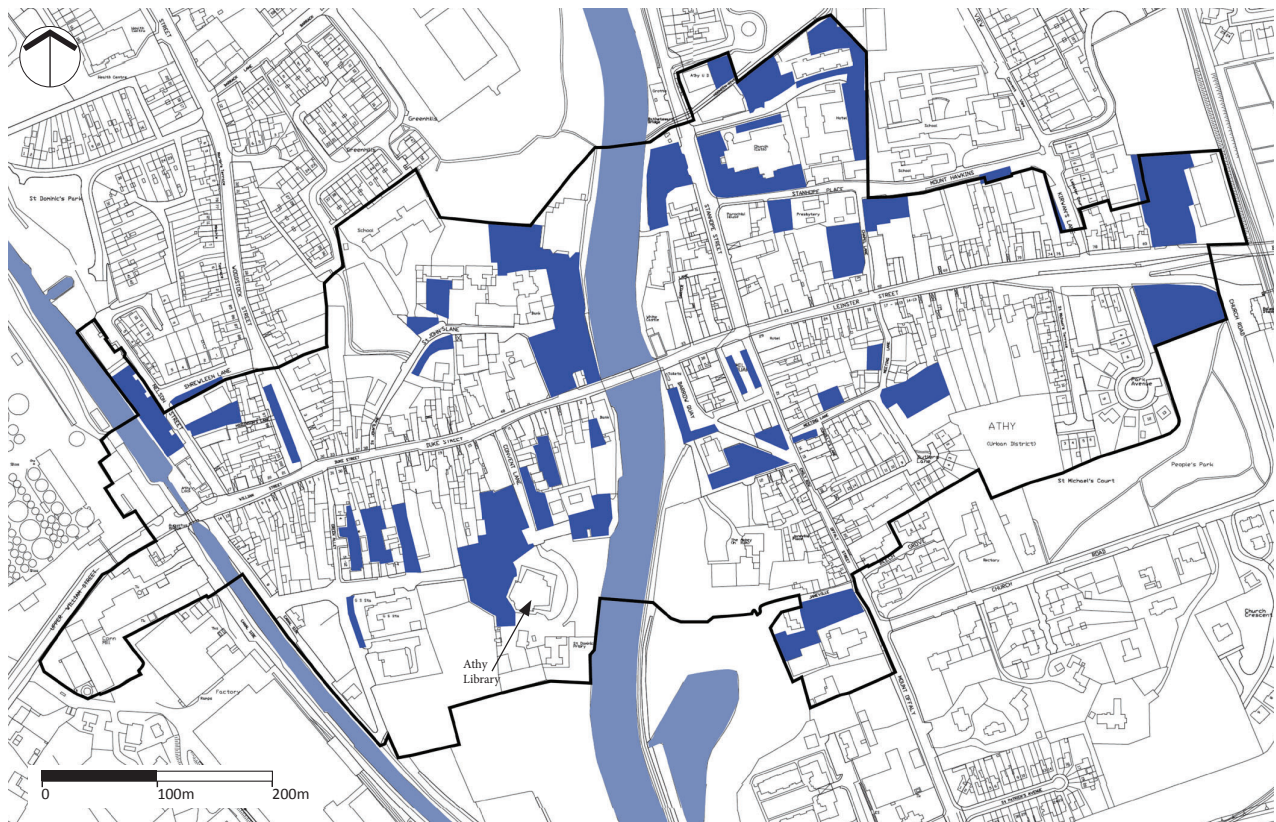


Figure 2.39: Extent of major surface car parking areas (dark blue shading) within Athy Town Centre



Figure 2.40: Car parking around Athy Library (far left)

As part of the urban quality analysis, a number of car parks were surveyed within the town centre on a weekday afternoon. This recorded that none of the car parks managed by the Council were operating at or even near capacity. Whilst it is acknowledged that the results provide only a snapshot in time and do not differentiate between short and long term parking demand, they do however demonstrate the need for further research on this topic with a view to developing a more integrated strategic plan for the public realm of Athy.

Table 2.1: Car parking survey of Six publicly managed car parks

Carpark	Capacity in Spaces	Spaces Occupied	% Occupancy
Meeting Lane	38	16	42%
Stanhope Street	52	29	56%
Emily Square	28	7	25%
Back Square and Barrow Quay	79	24	30%
Edmund Rice Square	84	32	38%
Dominican Lands	122	45	37%

Note: Survey was carried out between 3-4 pm on Thursday 17th September 2020. Weather conditions: Sunny, Temp. 21°C.

While there will always be a need for adequate car parking facilities to support the retail and service function of the town centre, an element of rationalisation is required. Parking should be provided at a proximate and convenient location to the designated core retail area but such areas should be to the interior of the urban block and not comprise a dominant feature along the key streets and public spaces. Indeed parking should be maintained in areas that would otherwise not support any street activities. An example of a well-sited car park within the town is the publicly owned car park on Meeting Lane. Parking at this location attracts people and enables passive surveillance of this backlands area, including the adjacent skate park. The distribution and quantum of car parking provision within the town needs to be a central consideration of any future public realm plan for the town.

2.7.5 Cycling Infrastructure

The flat topography and the relative proximity of key services and destinations means that cycling in Athy should be viewed as an attractive alternative to the car. Presently however, the supporting infrastructure for cycling throughout the town is weak. While certain key destinations in the town have cycle parking facilities, for example at the train station, the schools campus and the primary care centre, it is evident that there are no visible cycle stands or bays anywhere within the town centre. Furthermore, there are no dedicated cycle lanes present in Athy. It is noted that the Blueway (under construction) and the future Athy Distributor Road will provide for dedicated cycleways and have the capacity to form the spine of an integrated network. However, much remains to be done to realise a comprehensive network which would connect these high quality routes with dedicated cycleways linking residential and employment lands with key destinations across the town in order to provide for a convenient and safe alternative to the car.



Figure 2.41: Cycling facilities at Athy Primary Care Centre

2.8 Challenges and Opportunities

The previous sections analysed the quality of the urban environment across different scalar levels in Athy, ranging from a broad examination of the urban structure to a more detailed investigation of the quality of public space within the town centre. The primary conclusion from this research is that a considerable gap exists between the current situation within the town and the future development scenario of Athy, as outlined in the vision statement of the Plan, which envisages a sustainable, connected, age friendly and climate resilient town. The pattern of development over the last number of decades in Athy has resulted in a poorly connected and overly car-dependant settlement. The town centre continues to experience ongoing challenges relating to land use and activities, highlighting the need to find alternative roles for many vacant commercial buildings where the previous uses may no longer be viable. The poor quality of the public realm also detracts from the overall visitor experience and liveability of the town.

While there are a number of critical issues holding back Athy’s development potential, the analysis also found key areas of opportunity, based around the existing built and natural heritage present in the town. The development of the Barrow Blueway is of crucial importance and it is considered to be at the centre-piece of the Urban Regeneration Framework. With further carefully targeted investment in Athy’s waterways infrastructure there is an opportunity to unlock the town’s untapped tourist potential and to enable it to become a tourist destination of regional significance. Athy’s comprehensive network of green spaces also needs to be integrated with the river and canal and developed so that they can offer visitors complementary ‘*spin-off*’ recreational activities.

Another key area of potential for the town over the medium term is the construction of the Athy Distributor Road. This will provide a real opportunity to re-imagine the town’s public realm; its streets and public spaces. Such transformational change would complement the Blueway, entice people into the heart of the town and provide for new activities and economic synergies to develop. A re-visioned public realm would also encourage greater town centre living, create enhanced recreational spaces, thereby further increasing the town’s attractiveness as a cultural, tourism and business investment destination.



Figure 2.42: Traffic congestion in Athy Town Centre



Figure 2.43: Natural Heritage - Athy’s Waterways

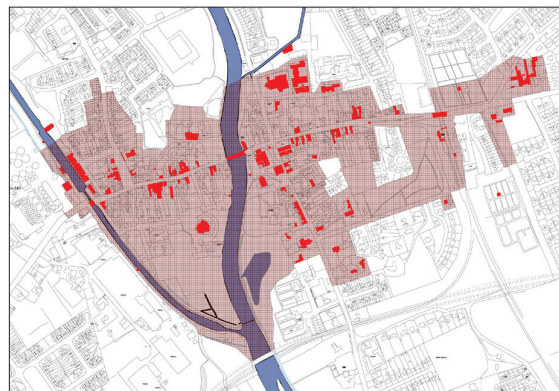


Figure 2.44: Built Heritage - Athy ACA (pink hashing)

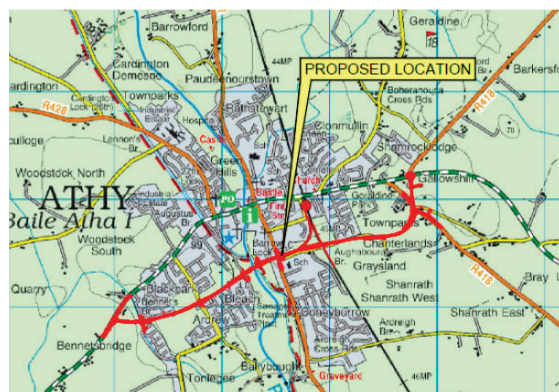


Figure 2.45: Route of Athy Distributor Road (in red)

3. Areas of Opportunity

3.1 Approach Taken

In identifying areas of opportunity to increase the economic potential of Athy, the principle of asset-based development comes to the fore. This approach which is central to the Local Area Plan's Economic Development Strategy (outlined in Section 6.3 of the Local Area Plan) places particular emphasis on utilising the town's rich stock of natural and built heritage resources to develop its tourism and amenity infrastructure, with the aim of enhancing the overall liveability and visitor experience of the town. It is considered that this approach will not only create and secure locally based employment opportunities, but also make the town as a whole a more attractive place for inward investment, improve the quality of life for residents in the town and lead to the creation of a more self-sustaining settlement. In pursuing such an assets-based principle to development, the findings of the urban quality analysis outlined in Section 2 have also been taken into account. These highlight that the town is experiencing challenges relating to connectivity, land use and activities, and the public realm. Accordingly, the outputs of the Framework proposes that these issues be dealt with across three broad strands, as follows:



Enhancing Connectivity: At an over-arching level, key destinations within the town need to be linked to residential and employment areas by a network of high quality pedestrian and cycle routes. Such supporting infrastructure is necessary in order to create a more integrated and age friendly settlement and provide for a realistic, safe and convenient alternative to the car, especially for short trips within the town.



Revitalising Activities: An issue that is particularly prominent within the town centre, it is considered that new and alternative uses need to be found for vacant units, many of which are protected structures. Active land management measures are also required to encourage the full utilisation of strategic brownfield and backland sites within the historic core of the town.



Transforming the Public Realm: A coordinated programme of investment is required for the town's public realm, which includes its public spaces, parks and streets and recreational infrastructure, in order to integrate with and maximise the potential socio-economic benefits of the Barrow Blueway. Such a placemaking exercise will reinforce the inherent qualities of existing character areas within the town and improve the experience of the town for visitors and residents alike.

The final outputs of the Framework (Section 3.6) will identify a number of priority projects for the town which are specifically designed to respond to the requirements of the three strands in a meaningful and comprehensive manner. As previously outlined in Section 1.5, the proposals will also have regard to the various past and present plans and projects for the town. These projects or aspects of the projects will only be incorporated into the outputs of the Framework where they align with aspirations set out in the three strands above.



Figure 3.1: Athy Character Areas

3.2 Developing Character Areas

The Urban Regeneration Framework identifies a number of character areas in and around the town centre. Whilst acknowledging various designations and boundaries in previous plans and studies, this framework seeks to define character areas around sites of activity and will focus their development as existing destinations or potential future destinations for the town.

The Framework will provide the opportunity for the character areas to be regenerated and enhanced so that they become the focus of prioritised projects within the town (see Section 3.6). To this end, the framework will briefly outline how the various character areas can each contribute to the overall regeneration of the town by:

- Identifying the main issues and challenges presently affecting the character area;
- Developing a coherent identity for the area based on its unique character and assets, and defining the role that it will play in the future development of the town and;
- Outlining the future spatial opportunities and high level urban design principles for each character area, which would contribute to the fulfilment of such an envisaged role.

Whilst the Urban Regeneration Framework sets out a series of proposals which are envisaged to be implemented over the medium to long term, the short term vision for the character areas should be to plan for the upgrading of the public realm, the identification of key connections and to set out desirable uses/activities. It is therefore considered that such a character-based focus is central to the development of any public realm strategy for the town (see Section 3.5).

The following areas have been selected as character areas (see Figure 3.1, right):

1. Town Core - East
2. Town Core - West
3. Dominican Lands
4. The Abbey and Marina Lands
5. Woodstock Lands

3.2.1 Town Core - East

Challenges and Opportunities

This character area comprises of the eastern part of the commercial core of Athy and is centred along Leinster Street. This route, when approached from the east is quite wide, however it gradually narrows, drawing one into the centre of the town at Emily Square, the most important civic space in Athy, with its architectural ensemble of the Heritage Centre (former town hall) and Courthouse (former corn exchange). Emily Square and Back Square, to the rear of the Heritage Centre, form a single spatial entity that is bordered to the west by the River Barrow. Although presently dominated by car parking and vehicular traffic, this unique space has the potential to capitalise on its strategic riverside and town centre location. Leinster Street itself is dominated by commercial and retail activities, though an element of residential is present along its eastern section. The high level of retail vacancies along the street is noticeable, as is the overall poor quality of the public realm which worsens as one moves to the side streets such as Meeting Lane, Chapel Lane and Kirwan's Lane.

There is potential for infill development within the area, most notably within a key site to the south of Leinster Street (see Section 3.4.2) which would, if developed, contribute greatly to the vitality and vibrancy of this part of the town centre, providing for both residential and commercial uses, as well as creating an alternative high quality pedestrian and cycling link between the town centre and the train station (see Section 3.3).

Envisaged Role

It is envisaged that the character area not only strengthen its role as part of the commercial and retail core of the town but also provides for the transformational change needed to maximise the potential of its key urban spaces such as Emily Square, Back Square and Barrow Quay, re-imagining them as places which showcase the towns historic, cultural and architectural heritage, whilst also attracting both visitors and businesses, and providing an enhanced sense of civic pride to the residents of the town.



Figure 3.2: View of Barrow Quay (credit: Athy Photography)

Key Urban Design Principles

- Ensure that Leinster Street retains its key function as the most important spatial route in the town by providing for a high quality public realm which places particular emphasis on pedestrian and cyclist mobility.
- Ensure that the eastern part of the character area acts as an eastern gateway to the town, by providing for a high quality and pedestrian friendly public realm around the ramp over the railway line and the junction of Leinster and Church Road (i.e. the access point to the train station).
- Ensure that the public realm of Emily Square, Back Square and Barrow Quay is developed as a coordinated and integrated single space which provides for high levels of interaction with the river.
- Provide for the sensitive development of infill sites, particularly along side streets. All developments must provide a strong urban edge and be designed to maximise passive surveillance of public areas.
- Facilitate car parking provision within the interior of urban blocks and backland sites rather than along visually sensitive areas of the public realm, where possible.
- Ensure that the Public Realm Strategy provides for the upgrading of side streets in the area in order to provide for attractive and well-defined urban spaces.
- Provide for the 'undergrounding' of all overhead wiring particular along Leinster Street and other areas within the Athy Architectural Conservation Area (ACA).
- Ensure that the strategic infill site to the south of Leinster Street is developed in a manner which enhances the existing character of the area, revitalises activities and creates high quality pedestrian/cyclist connections through the site.

3.2.2 Town Core - West

Challenges and Opportunities

Comprising the western portion of the town core, the spine of this character area is composed of Duke Street and William Street which is a continuation of the commercial artery formed by Leinster Street across the river to the east. Other critical spaces in the area include Edmund Rice Square and Woodstock Street. While the former is dominated by car parking, it nevertheless is an area that has a noticeably high pedestrian footfall and as such has the potential to be re-imagined as an attractive and successful civic space within the town. Commercial and retail uses feature particularly prominently in the area, albeit with high levels of unit vacancy.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of this character area is the presence of good quality examples of residential living within the backlands of Duke Street. Centred around an attractive laneway, such housing offers a model for sustainable town centre living that could be emulated across the entire commercial core. Since the character area is bound by both the River Barrow and the Barrow Line Canal there is great potential to improve north-south links along these routes. Whilst the route along the canal will form part of the Barrow Blueway, the Public Realm Strategy should plan for improvements along the River Barrow. Other north-south links such as Convent Lane and St. John's Lane have the potential to enhance connections to the strategic open spaces of the Woodstock lands to the north and the Dominican lands to the south. The area around Augustus Bridge acts as an eastern gateway to the town and should be upgraded accordingly, to reflect its significant location.

Envisaged Role

Similar to the Town Core - East, it is envisaged that this character area should continue to play a central role as part of the commercial and retail core of the town. The transformation of key spaces such as Edmund Rice Square, Duke Street and Augustus Bridge are critical for attracting visitors and shoppers to Athy. The critical asset of this character area is its potential to act as a strategic connector between north and south and east and west.



Figure 3.3: Attractive residential laneway off Duke Street

Key Urban Design Principles

- Ensure that the Duke Street / William Street axis retains its key function as the most important spatial route in the town by providing for a high quality public realm which places particular emphasis on pedestrian and cyclist mobility.
- Provide for the development of an upgraded civic space in Edmund Rice Square which is fully integrated with any riverside promenade route alongside the Barrow.
- Ensure that the western part of the character area around Augustus Bridge is re-imagined as a western gateway to the town, through the provision of high quality and pedestrian friendly public realm at this important junction with the Barrow Blueway which will provide for a sense of arrival.
- Ensure that the Public Realm Strategy provides for the upgrading of side streets in the area including Monastery Lane and St. John's Lane in order to provide for attractive and welcoming spaces.
- Provide for the 'undergrounding' of all overhead wiring in particular along Duke Street, William Street and other areas within the Athy Architectural Conservation Area (ACA).
- Promote permeability within the urban block and encourage interventions to restore block permeability to Duke Street. This will be further explored as part of the Dominican lands masterplan (see Section 3.6).
- Facilitate a rationalisation and reorganisation of public car parking provision within the character area, as part of an overall traffic management plan for the town centre.
- Facilitate the development of infill sites in a sensitive manner having regard to the ACA and any adjacent established uses. All developments must provide a strong urban edge and be designed to maximise passive surveillance of the street.

3.2.3 The Dominican Lands

Challenges and Opportunities

The Dominican lands occupy a large triangular area immediately to the south of Duke Street. Water plays a key role in defining the character of the area and it is bordered to the east by the River Barrow and the west by the canal which merge at the apex of the triangle to the south. The lands are joined to the north by Duke Street and the commercial core of the town but have a very backlands character, which for the most part lacks any defined street frontage. This area is also intensively used for both publicly and privately owned car parking, which is arranged in an informal and somewhat haphazard manner. A key building of note in the area is Athy Library (former Dominican Church) which acts as an important landmark in the town (see Figure 3.4). To the south of the library the lands mostly constitute picturesque green open space comprising of some mature trees and waterside walks along the river and canal. Indeed, the Statement of Character for the Athy Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) notes that in relation to the Dominican lands, *'very few towns in Ireland can boast such a landscape setting of such high visual and heritage value'*.

Considering the inherent character and natural assets of the area, there is huge opportunity to harness the potential of the canal and river and develop the Dominican Lands as a hub for water and amenity-based activities within the town. Indeed, the Council is currently progressing such a plan as part of its masterplan for the Dominican Lands and Blueway sports hub/education centre (see Priority Project 4, Table 3.1). There is also the potential for built form to be developed along the northern fringe of the area to create a strong urban edge (along the northside of Convent Lane). Such development should provide for high levels of integration with both the town core to the north and the open space to the south. A future pedestrian and cyclist footbridge is proposed to be located to the south of Convent Lane. This crucial link will allow for the creation of an alternative high quality pedestrian and cycling link between the Barrow Blueway, the town centre and the train station (see Figure 3.8 and Section 3.3).

Envisaged Role

The Dominican Lands will become a multi-use tourism resource located at the centre of Athy's waterways infrastructure. Acting as a key activity hub, the area's upgrade facilities will attract local, national and international boat users offering a range of activities including fishing, walking, cycling, kayaking etc. whilst also being an attraction for nature enthusiasts.



Figure 3.4: View across the River towards the Dominican lands

Dominican Lands Masterplan

The area is subject to a separate masterplanning process which has already commenced. This process has taken into account all the challenges and opportunities for the character area, as outlined above. Thus, it is envisaged that the outputs of the masterplan will include a series of design measures and provisions which will maximise the potential of the lands while also taking into consideration the sensitive location of the site within an ACA and bordered by a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) to the east and a proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA) to the west. The masterplan will also provide for the appropriate facilities and infrastructure to be developed to help it realise its envisaged future role.

3.2.4 The Abbey and Marina Lands

Challenges and Opportunities

This area is located to the south of Emily Square/Back Square, adjacent to the River Barrow and is composed of the abbey lands to the north and the marina lands to the south. The abbey lands, whilst almost entirely cleared of vegetation retains a number of mature trees along its northern and western boundaries which contributes to its character. This area in particular has experienced ongoing issues relating to anti-social behaviour and illegal dumping. The marina itself, is an artificial inlet of the River Barrow constructed a number of years ago but has subsequently been designated as part of the Barrow and Nore Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The SAC also encompasses the western boundary of the character area alongside the river. The area is therefore considered to be very environmentally sensitive and this places challenges in terms of its future development. The majority of the lands also lie within flood risk areas, which places further constraints on the potential development of these lands.

The marina itself is not open to the general public, however it is currently managed for fishing activities by Athy and District Anglers' Club. Whilst there may be possibilities for some development within the northeast confines of the character area, the key opportunities should be based on harnessing its attractive riverside location and promoting an increase in recreational and amenity activities on the lands. The riverside path, which is also part of the Athy Town Centre Slí na Sláinte walking route, will play an important role in accessing the lands either from Emily Square/Back Square to the north or from the horse bridge (connecting with the Blueway) to the south. Other key links through the site also need to be developed such as connecting the River Barrow path with the lane at Janeville which would link into Offaly Street (see Figure 3.8).

Envisaged Role

It is envisaged that the character area will to a large extent play a complementary role to the Dominican Lands across the river, in that it should also be home to various water-based recreational and amenity spin-off activities arising from the development of the Barrow Blueway and Blueway Hub.



Figure 3.5: Kayaking on the River Barrow in Athy



Figure 3.6: Amenity infrastructure (credit: Athy Photography)

Key Urban Design Principles

- Enhance the connectivity of the site by upgrading the River Barrow pathway and allowing for the development of permeable routes throughout the site, including a link east from the river through the character area to Janeville.
- The development of any built form on the site must provide for a strong urban edge and enhanced passive surveillance of publicly accessible spaces.
- Any development plans for the area must incorporate, as far as possible, the mature trees bordering the area to the north and along the Barrow pathway to the west.
- Development proposals for the area must respect the sensitive environmental nature of the area, as such any landscaping and public realm works undertaken must incorporate appropriate sustainable and ecologically friendly features.

3.2.5 Woodstock Lands

Challenges and Opportunities

The majority of this large character area is composed of approximately 13 hectares of open space which extends along the River Barrow into the centre of the town. The lands which are under the ownership of the Council, are bordered by the river to the east and residential developments to the west. For the most part the lands presently comprise of under-utilised open grassland, with a playground facility and some informal playing pitches. The area is also home to the K-Leisure swimming pool and gym. This facility, while an excellent amenity for the town, does not interact very much with its immediate surroundings, being fenced off from its immediate surroundings. Overall, the lack of boundaries around the Woodstock lands have resulted in high levels of interaction with the residential estates to the west. While there is public access between the lands and the town centre to the south, there are poor levels of integration. Such a situation is exacerbated by the presence of Pettitt's supermarket which blocks visual links between the lands and the town centre. One notable feature of the lands are the remains of Woodstock Castle (see Figure 3.7), one of the oldest structures in Athy and one which played an important role in the town's early history and development. It is considered that the castle should be placed as the centre of focus in any future landscaping masterplan for lands (see Priority Project 8, Table 3.1).



Figure 3.7: Ruins of Woodstock Castle

Envisaged Role

The Woodstock lands have the potential to provide an array of passive and active recreational amenities for residents not just in the immediate vicinity but for the town as a whole. It is therefore envisaged that the lands should be developed to their full potential as a neighbourhood park, as identified in the Athy Social Infrastructure Audit (published alongside the Plan).

Key Urban Design Principles

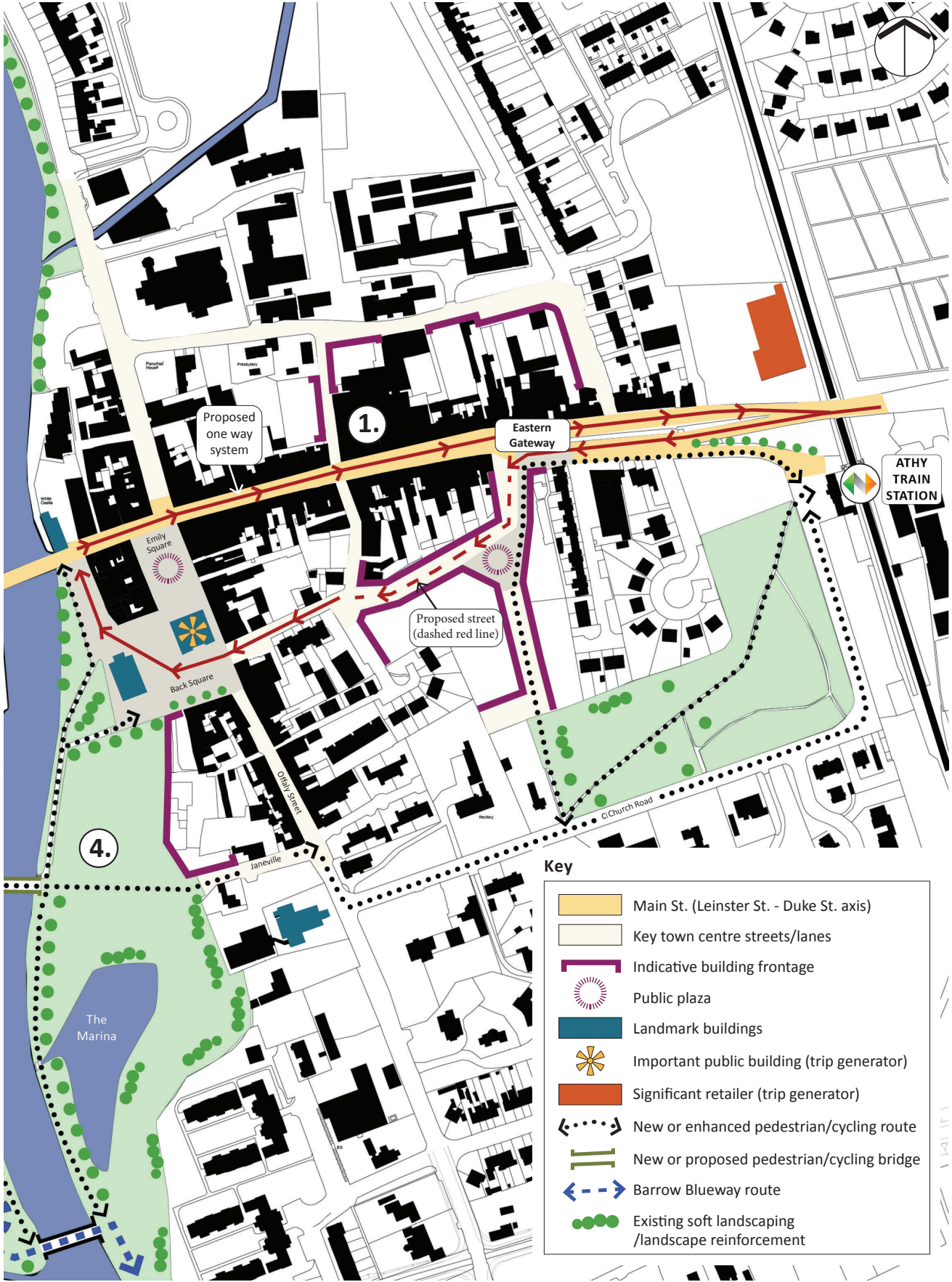
- Development proposals for the character area must respect the sensitive environmental nature of the lands and the fact that they are situated within a flood plain, adjacent to a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). Accordingly, any landscaping and public realm works undertaken must incorporate appropriate sustainable and ecologically friendly features.
- Ensure that the remains of Woodstock Castle are the centre focus of any future masterplan for the lands. Any such masterplanning scheme should also seek to provide a comprehensive soft landscaping scheme for the lands. The masterplan should also investigate the possibility that any future flood relief works on the lands be incorporated into the overall landscaping design.
- Provide for increased interaction between the K-Leisure facility and the surrounding Woodstock lands.
- Ensure improved access to the lands and enhanced connections with the town centre to the south which would include improved connections along the river Barrow and integration with any public realm improvements to Edmund Rice Square (see Section 3.2.2 and Figure 3.8)
- Provide for an array of passive and active recreation facilities on the lands in accordance with standards set out for a Neighbourhood Park.
- Examine the possibility of locating community managed gardens, allotments and a community compost facility on the lands.

3.2.6 Character Areas within a Regenerated Town Centre



This map provides an illustration as to how a revitalised Athy Town Centre would function and includes the envisaged changes outlined in sections 3.2.1 - 3.2.5. Aside from the development of brownfield and backland sites, perhaps the biggest transformation would be the creation of a people-centred public realm, linked to key destinations and amenity routes throughout the town. The following sections provides further details on these proposals.

Figure 3.8: Character areas within a regenerated town centre



3.3 Enhancing Connectivity

3.3.1 Creating an Integrated Network

The realisation of integrated sustainable communities is one of the Eight Strategic Development Principles guiding the Athy Local Area Plan. A vital component of this is the creation of a network of sustainable movement routes and connections which link neighbourhoods with key destinations throughout the town. Whilst this Framework has noted that many of these connections are currently lacking in Athy, it also illustrated the huge potential for their development. Indeed, both the Barrow Blueway (currently under construction) along with the Athy Distributor Road feature high-quality pedestrian and cycling facilities, which together, will form the core of a dedicated sustainable movement network transecting the town (see Figure 3.9, below). This opportunity has also been identified by the Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA), a supporting document published alongside the Plan. It is further noted that the north-south Barrow Blueway route will connect directly with the new east-west Athy Distributor Road once constructed.

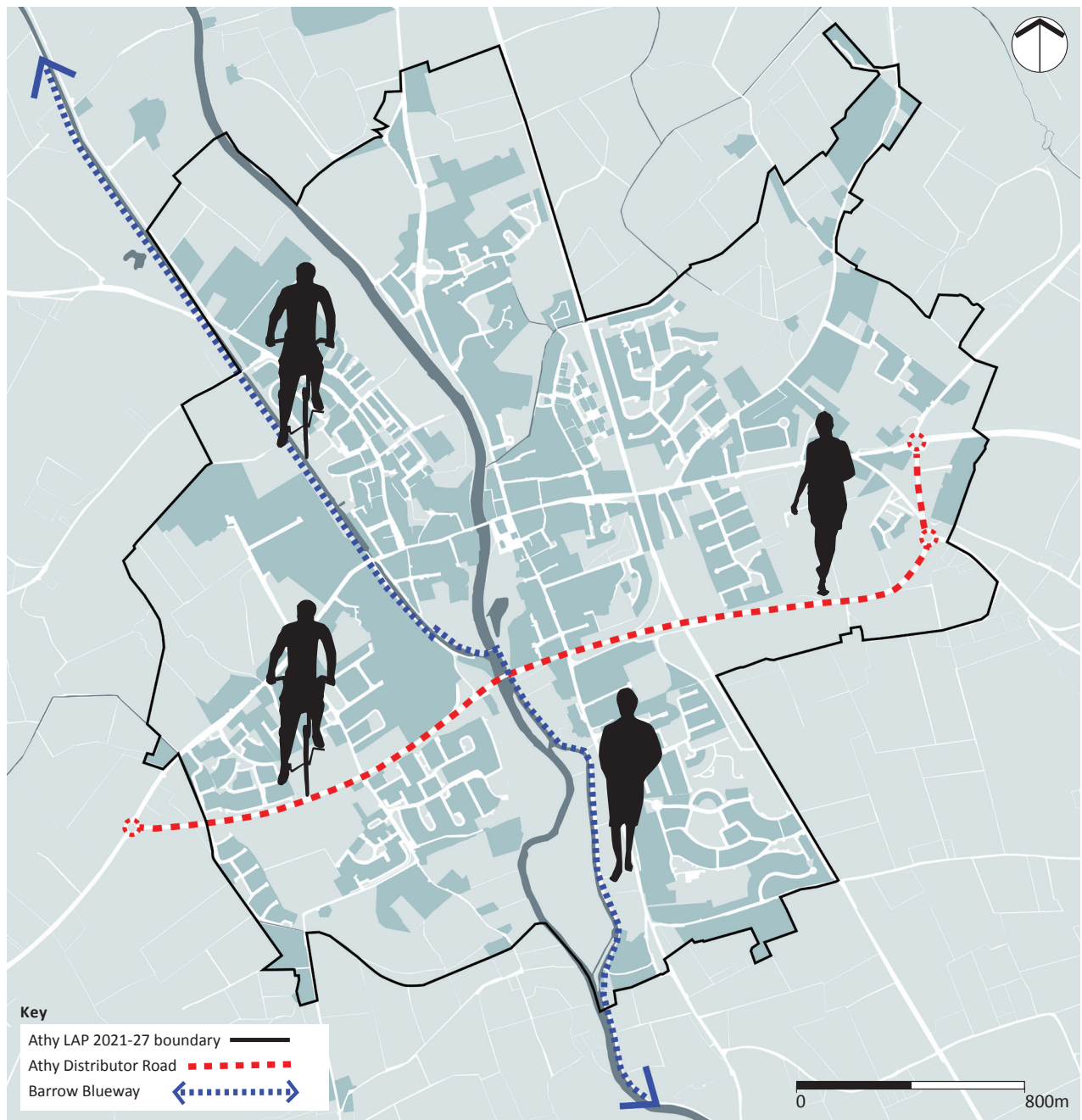


Figure 3.9: The core of the future sustainable movement network in Athy

3.3.2 Proposed Pedestrian/Cycling routes and Other Connectivity Projects

Whilst the Barrow Blueway and the Athy Distributor Road will form two major connectivity spines of the network, the ABTA also proposes a series of pedestrian/cycling routes designed to integrate with these routes and create an broader high-quality network throughout the town. The ABTA outlines a list of options ranging from upgrading existing infrastructure to the building of new infrastructure along with the provision of other supporting measures, such as for example, enhanced pedestrian and cyclist priority at traffic junctions. These options have been transposed into **Chapter 7 Movement and Transport** of the Plan and are supported by statutory objectives contained therein.

While the options for both walking and cycling in the town seek to utilise and upgrade existing routes, for example along Athy’s waterways, there are also several instances where links are badly needed to increase connectivity at a local level. Figure 3.10 (see right) illustrates such a scenario within a housing estate located off Geraldine Road, where no formal connections exist between the development and the nearest main road. In this case, people have resorted to creating an informal route. Such desire lines demonstrate the residents’ collective need for connectivity beyond their immediate surroundings. Only through the creation of universally accessible links at a local level will the town become truly integrated and the potential of the strategic links be fully realised. Accordingly, the Local Area Plan, also outlines options for enhancing local connectivity in specific areas throughout the town (see Section 7.4 and Maps 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 of the Plan).



Figure 3.10: Informal routes accessing Geraldine Road

3.3.3 Pedestrian and Cycling Routes within the Town Centre

The development of a network of upgraded and new walking and cycle routes within the town centre is crucial for both its economic and social wellbeing. The creation of looped routes focused around the Athy’s waterways including the Barrow Blueway, will help to maximise the tourist and recreational potential of this key amenity.



Figure 3.11: Proposed new/upgraded pedestrian/cycle routes in the town centre

3.4 Revitalising Activities in the Town Centre

The high level of vacancies within the town centre is perhaps the biggest obstacle needed to be overcome to achieve a successful regeneration of the historic core. Such an issue is considered entrenched in the town and requires a targeted and long term response. Tackling vacancies will have positive repercussions, not just for town centre rejuvenation but also for the settlement as a whole, where bringing existing building stock back into use will provide additional benefits in terms of strengthening environmental and climate resilience. The revitalisation of town centre land uses can only be achieved by recognising that some former uses (including retail uses) will not be returning and by identifying and encouraging credible alternative uses and functions for these units.

The current situation in the town has taken on a new dimension with the housing crisis. Athy is now a designated Rent Pressure Zone. Consequently, the need for an increased housing supply within the town is critical. Whilst it is to be welcomed that there has been a reduction in the level of residential vacancies in the town centre, more needs to be done. Serious consideration must be given to the re-purposing of vacant commercial units as homes. Such a change of use may not require permission, as outlined in *Bringing Back Homes: Manual for the Reuse of Existing Buildings*. Whilst the Core Retail Area should be respected, there is huge potential in the town centre to increase its residential population, foster compact development and revitalise its main commercial streets. Aside from housing, other ideas for their potential uses of vacant buildings should be imaginative and flexible, and respond to the rapidly changing trends and requirements of our economy. Accordingly, the Plan specifically identifies and supports the following alternative uses within Athy Town Centre:

- Live-work units
- Remote working facilities (with access to high speed broadband)
- Enterprise incubation hubs
- Tourist ‘spin-off’ enterprises
- Tourist accommodation
- Specialised services (speciality food/craft shops)

3.4.1 The Role of Kildare County Council in Reusing Buildings

Kildare County Council has taken a leading role in finding alternative uses for key buildings in Athy. For example, the Heritage Centre on Emily Square served during different periods as a Town Hall, Fire Station and a Library. The Council also successfully transformed the Dominican Church as the town’s new public Library, which was opened in 2018. At the initiative of the Council, the former Model School, a prominent protected structure within the town, is set to become the home of the Athy Food, Drinks and Skills Innovation Hub, an incubation and innovation space which will be a regional centre for food and drinks research and development .

In addition to coordinating direct interventions to finding new and adaptable uses for prominent existing buildings in Athy, the Council has over the past number of years engaged with private land owners in the town centre with the aim of reducing instances of vacancy and dereliction. As previously noted in Section 2.5.2, this has yielded very positive results. Contact has been made with owners of vacant sites and properties across the town, with specific emphasis on strategic locations within the town centre. A key area that requires attention is the improvement of the streetscape in some areas of the town. To this end, Kildare County Council’s recently introduced shopfront renewal scheme has assisted in providing grant funding that has facilitated the improvement of a number of shopfronts in the town centre. It is acknowledged that further work is needed particularly in terms of continuing to engage with property owners and their representatives to encourage redevelopment/refurbishment. In this regard, the council is committed to maintaining this positive momentum and assisting where possible.

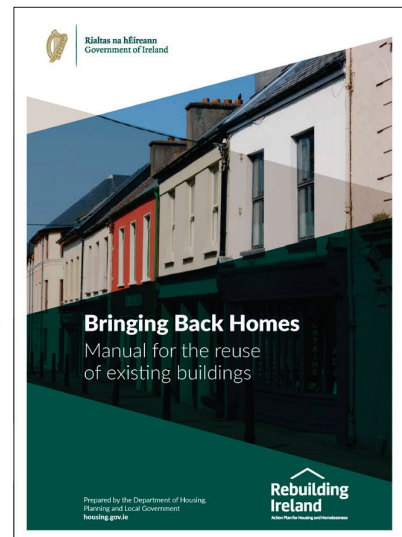


Figure 3.12: Manual for the Reuse Existing Buildings



Figure 3.13: Athy Library

An action of the Local Area Plan also includes investigating the feasibility of the Council acquiring a vacant commercial unit within the town centre (or in partnership with a landowner) in order to demonstrate as a 'pilot project' the possibility of re-purposing such a building for alternative uses (see Chapter 5 of the Local Area Plan).

3.4.2 Development Opportunity Sites in the Town Centre

There are a number of high-profile vacant sites in the town centre that offer great potential not just in terms of increasing activities and improving placemaking within the historic core but also providing the opportunity for achieving the target to have at least 10% of all new units in Athy built on town centre lands (see Section 3.3.2 of the Plan). The two sites identified below, provide indicative examples of the urban form, connections and activities that could be achieved on such sites.

Site A - Dominican Lands



Figure 3.14: Indicative design framework

The Dominican lands occupy a prominent location in the town centre which, notwithstanding environmental constraints, can accommodate a level of infill development which would contribute to improving the urban environment whilst also providing for an increased level of vitality and activities within this part of the historic core. The indicative design framework (see left, Figure 3.14) illustrates the potential for creating a well-defined east-west street along Convent Lane. A new civic square would also be created at the library. The new spaces would be defined by a strong urban edge, which would act as a bookend to this part of the town core and provide for a strong level of passive surveillance. Envisaged land uses should include a mix of residential and commercial. A strong visual and permeable connection should be maintained between the north and south of the site. Figure 3.14 also incorporates a proposed pedestrian/cycle link between the Blueway and the town centre (see Section 3.3).

Site B - Rear of Leinster Street



Figure 3.15: Indicative design framework

This strategic 1.45 hectare site to the rear of Leinster Street is key to the development of the east-west link, which will allow for a one-way traffic system to be created, to improve the public realm and provide cycleways. The site has the capacity to both create increased connectivity and permeability whilst also providing for an intensification of commercial uses (including an anchor retail tenant) which would add to the overall retail offer of the town centre. The indicative design framework (see left, Figure 3.15) illustrates the internal streets of the development as being people-centred, with car parking to be located to the interior of the urban block. This creates the possibility of developing a central civic plaza. The potential for a high-quality pedestrian/cycle link with the People's Park to the south is also illustrated. Envisaged land uses on the site should incorporate retail, commercial and residential units.

3.5 Transforming Athy’s Public Realm

The Statement of Character for the Athy Architectural Conservation Area (ACA) notes that *‘the town is experienced along its street spaces, river and canal.’* A number of regeneration projects such as the Barrow Blueway and the Dominican Lands Masterplan seek to enhance the public experience of Athy’s natural and built heritage features. However, it is the public realm that is the critical common denominator that links these proposals to each other. Whilst it is evident that the public realm is somewhat of an unloved and overlooked feature within the town, the potential for transformational change in connecting these key visitor attractions through high quality and universally accessible public spaces is huge. It is therefore considered that such a placemaking exercise will furnish the opportunity for increased liveability and investment in the town, while also providing a responsive and design-based solution which will be unique to Athy.

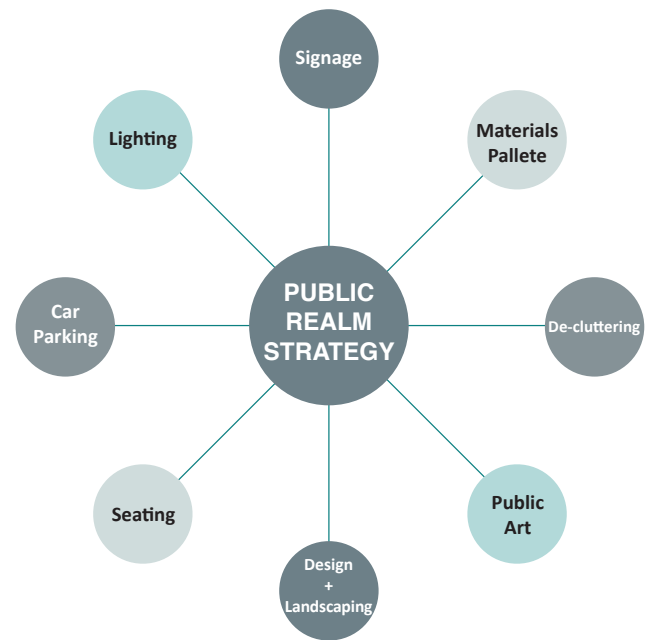


Figure 3.16: Factors to be considered in a Public Realm Strategy

Having regard to the above and noting the importance of having a comprehensive plan in place ready to be implemented in order to maximise the opportunities with the opening of the Athy Distributor Road, it is an objective to commence the preparation of a Public Realm Strategy for Athy within twelve months of the adoption of Local Area Plan (UCRO1.10). This strategy will be implemented on a phased basis during the lifetime of the plan and beyond, to support and facilitate the regeneration of the town. The Strategy will seek to develop and deliver an actions based programme for the effective presentation, development and management of the town’s public realm. While the focus will primarily be on the town centre, proposals for other important areas of the town such as the approach roads and gateways, along with public transport nodes such as the train station should also be examined.

Specifically, the Public Realm Strategy will incorporate the following provisions:

- Provide guidance and propose a suite of spatial interventions that will be focused on improving the legibility of the character areas identified in Section 3.2 and developing them as key visitor destinations within the town centre.
- Undertake a car parking analysis of the town, the outputs of which will comprise of a comprehensive car parking plan for the town centre, which will balance the needs of vehicular access to the town centre without compromising the overall quality and visitor experience of the public realm.
- Devise a bespoke materials palette for the town, including for pavement, signage and street furniture which will complement and enhance the natural and built environment of Athy.
- Develop a bespoke wayfinder scheme for the town which will provide up-to-date information on activities, attractions and looped walks within the town to aid visitor orientation.
- Have regard to the provisions of the Urban Regeneration Framework, particularly to the incorporation of proposed public realm interventions with the connectivity routes outlined in Section 3.3.
- Incorporate the recommendations of the Walkability Audit Report for Athy to create an age friendly and universally accessible town centre.
- To consider the incorporation of proposals outlined in the Conservation, Management and Interpretation Plan for Athy (2016) which seeks to create a physical focus in the centre of the town that celebrates the medieval heritage, including the town walls of Athy.

‘The town is experienced along its street spaces, river and canal’

p.6, Athy Architectural Conservation Area Statement of Character (2020)

3.6 Conclusion: Priority Projects for Athy

The 8 priority projects outlined below have been selected on the basis of their potential to addressing the current development challenges facing the town and their contribution to delivering the three strands (see below) thus ensuring the realisation of a sustainable, resilient and inclusive settlement which will also be a key tourist destination of regional significance.



Enhancing Connectivity



Revitalising Activities



Transforming the Public Realm

Table 3.1: List of priority projects of the Urban Regeneration Framework












Priority Project	Strand	Description	Key LAP Supporting Objectives
1. Barrow Blueway		The development of the Barrow Blueway, initially from Robertstown to Athy will realise the untapped potential of the route as a multi-use tourism resource for the town. The Blueway (currently under construction) is considered to be the centrepiece of the town's future tourist offer and crucial in fostering the development of sustainable and locally based tourist spin-off enterprises.	EDTO3.1 to EDTO3.4 MTO1.1 MTO1.3 GI1.6 GI1.11 OS1.1
2. A Public Realm Strategy for Athy		<p>This Framework has identified the development of a Public Realm Strategy as a short term priority for the town, to be commenced within 12 months of the adoption of the Plan. Such a strategy is considered to be fundamental in producing a co-ordinated and transformational programme of works for the town's public space.</p> <p>The Public Realm Strategy will seek to capitalise on the opening of the Athy Distributor Road and the consequent freeing up of space within the town centre. The main focus of the strategy will be the enhancement of character areas and contributing to their development as a key visitor destinations, thus improving the overall liveability and attractiveness of the town for both visitors and residents alike.</p>	HCO2.2 UCRO1.3 UCRO1.6 UCRO1.8 UCRO1.9 UCRO1.10 EDTO3.5 EDTO3.6 EDTO3.10 MTO1.1 to MTO1.9 MTO2.2 MTO3.5 BH2.9 BH2.12 BH2.14 IO4.3 IO4.4
3. Emily Square Upgrade and Athy Heritage Centre Extension and Refurbishment	 	This project combines two projects which have already secured Part 8 Planning Permission; the public realm upgrade works to Emily Square and the redevelopment of the Athy Heritage Centre - Shackleton Museum, which will provide for the development of a high-profile visitor destination at a strategic and attractive town centre and riverside location.	HCO2.2 HCO4.2 UCRO1.2 UCRO1.9 EDTO3.6 to EDTO3.8 BH1.2 to BH1.7
4. Dominican Lands and Blueway Hub Masterplan	  	<p>A masterplan will be prepared for the former Dominican Lands and its immediate surroundings which will accommodate the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new urban built edge to the north • A new civic square/public realm surrounding the Library • An eco-park • A Blueway sports hub/education centre • Pedestrian/cyclist bridge across the River Barrow, • Flood defence works • Social housing scheme (for the over 55's) 	HCO2.2 HCO4.1 UCRO1.2 UCRO1.8 EDTO3.1 to EDTO3.8 MTO1.5 MTO1.7 MTO1.8 OS1.1 OS1.5

Table 3.1: List of priority projects of the Urban Regeneration Framework (continued...)

Priority Project	Strand	Description	Key LAP supporting objectives
5. A Connectivity Programme for Athy		<p>This programme has been guided by the Area Based Transport Assessment (ABTA) for Athy and includes options for developing an integrated network for walking and cycling. The proposals have been transposed into Section 7.4 of the Local Area Plan and collectively, they combine to form a Connectivity Programme for the town. The Programme includes options for upgrading of existing infrastructure, construction of new infrastructure and other supporting enhancements.</p>	<p>HCO2.2 EDTO3.1 EDTO3.5 UCRO1.8 MTO1 to MTO.1.9 MTO4.3 MTO4.4 GI1.6 OS1.2 OS1.6</p>
6. Active Land Management Programme		<p>This programme involves a range of actions including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying the Vacant Site levy to prominent and problematic sites within the town centre. • Continuing to engage with property owners regarding vacant sites within the town and providing assistance where required, for example through the issuing of grants as part of the Kildare County Council Shopfront Renewal and Accessibility Scheme. • Aiming to update the Town Centre Land Use Survey on a biennial basis during the lifetime of the Plan. • Supporting the development of alternative uses and functions for vacant units within the town centre, as identified in Section 3.4. • Explore the feasibility of the Council acquiring a vacant commercial unit within the town centre (or alternatively, in partnership with a landowner) in order to demonstrate as a ‘pilot project’ the possibility of developing alternative uses and functions. 	<p>CSO1.3 UCRO1.2 UCRO1.3 UCRO1.4 UCRO1.5 UCRO1.9 UCRO2.2 to UCRO2.5 EDTO1.7 EDTO1.13 EDTO1.15 EDTO3.12 MTO4.3 BH1.4 BH1.5 BH1.8 BH2.8 BH2.10</p>
7. Athy Food, Drinks and Skills Innovation Hub		<p>This regional facility will be located in the refurbished Model School and aims to facilitate the development new and innovative food and drinks businesses. The Council considers the hub to represent a critical component of the economic development strategy for Athy and will, through the Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and associated bodies, continue to progress the development of the hub over the short to medium term.</p>	<p>HCO3.2 EDTO1.4 EDTO1.7 EDTO1.12</p>
8. Woodstock Lands Masterplan		<p>This project seeks to maximise the potential of the Woodstock lands as a recreational space not just for the immediate area but one that can be utilised by the population of the town as a whole. The Masterplan will seek to develop the lands to their full potential as a neighbourhood park, maximise its riverside location, whilst also making Woodstock Castle a key point of focus.</p>	<p>EDTO3.5 EDTO3.9 MTO1.8 OS1.1 OS1.3 OS1.7 OS1.8</p>

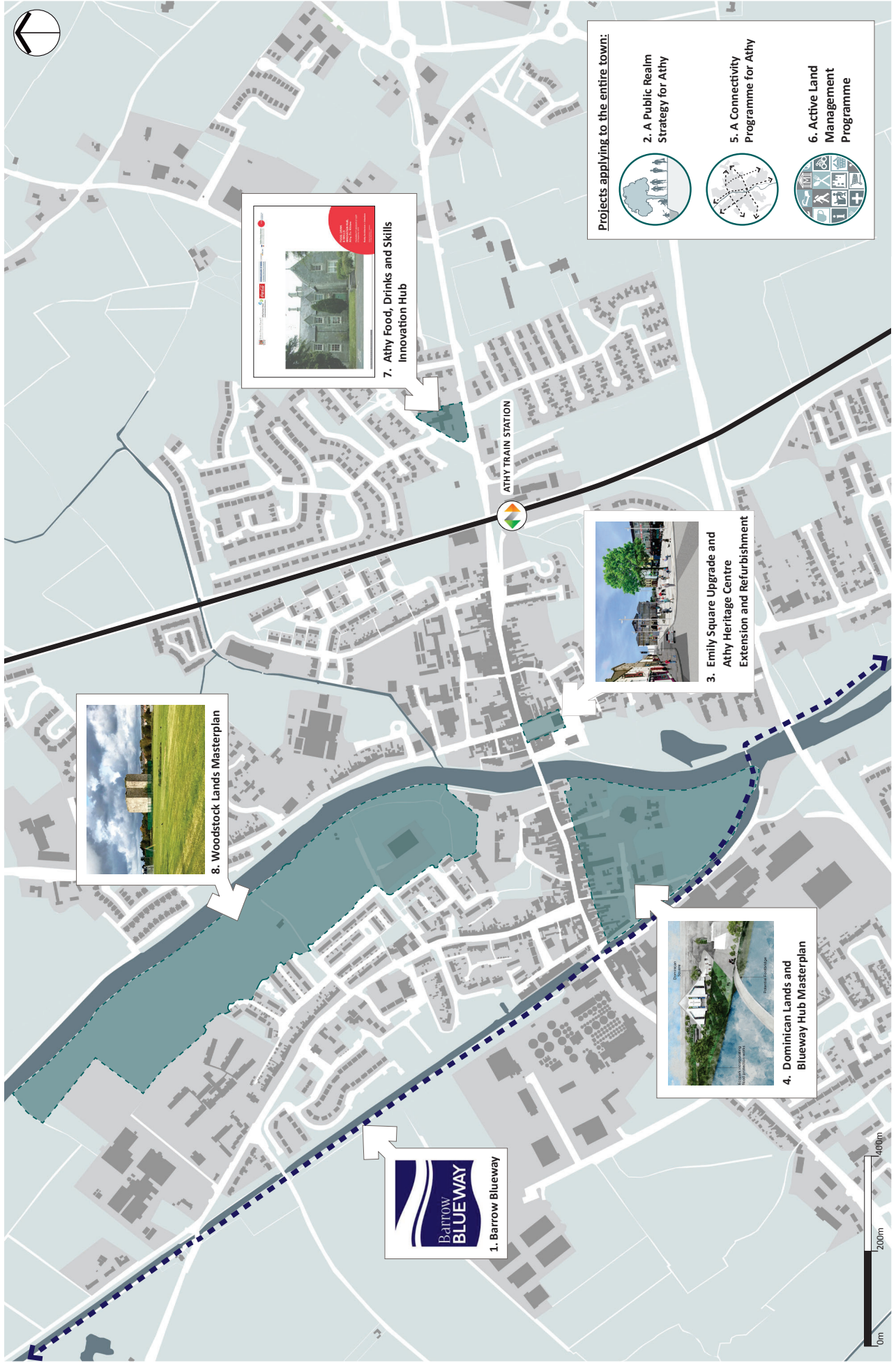


Figure 3.17: Priority Projects within Athy



KILDARE COUNTY COUNCIL

**ATHY
LOCAL
AREA PLAN
2021-2027**

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